

DURARARA!!

DRRR!!

3



RYOHGO NARITA

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



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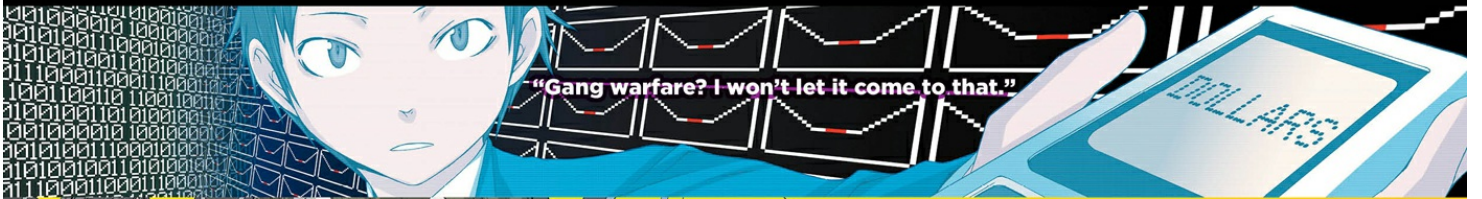


RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA



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"Gang warfare? I won't let it come to that."



"Shit... How dare you suck me back in..."

YELLOW
SCARVES



"I shouldn't bother hoping for a human life..."



VOLUME 3

Ryohgo Narita
ILLUSTRATION BY **Suzuhito Yasuda**

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DOLLARS

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Prologue: Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha

Hey.

Wanna hear a nasty story?

Hey, you. You ever killed someone?

I have.

C'mon, don't look at me like that.

Pretty much anyone who's worked on a big farm has killed something.

Chickens, cows. Killing really takes it out of you.

There are lots of ways to get over that: experience, environment, religion, hunger. But until you get to that point, it's still rough.

Once you're a full-grown adult, not a stupid kid, some people aren't even sure if they want to stomp on a line of ants. What about you?

Whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on. C'mon, I told you not to look at me like that. I'm not trying to lecture you, and I'm not preaching a religion or a vegetarian diet or anything like that.

Listen, I'm not talking about animals here. I love raw meat. I have pride. But all that aside...

I'm talking about people.

The thing is, it takes a lot of labor to kill a person.

I mean, don't get the wrong idea. People die easy. Push 'em off the train platform, wedge an ice pick into the back of their head, and that's it. Age, sex, and experience all mean nothing. If you can't beat them in a fight, just poison

them.

Anyone with eyes in their back who can dodge bullets and digest poison isn't a mere human, so they're not applicable to this exercise. Rule out the Headless Rider, who might be dead from the start for all I know, and that freak of nature who throws vending machines one-handed.

...Oops, I'm getting off track. Sorry.

At any rate, you can kill people real easily.

But it takes an incredible amount of work to actually kill.

People die quick, but it takes labor to go from "wanting to kill" to "killing."

You often hear about stupid kids thinking they were just gonna beat on a guy, real easy, and then he just up and died on them. Right?

But when you have an adult, someone much, much stronger than a kid, possibly in possession of a gun...and they calmly think to themselves, *All right, I'm going to kill him*, that takes quite a lot of mental effort. Especially the first time. It's different once you get used to it—then there's no going back. At least, according to what I heard a soldier say once on TV when he came back from some war or another.

What I'm getting at is, it's really, really hard for normal folks like you to rationally kill a person.

It's a whole lot easier to suddenly go into a rage, scream that you're going to kill someone, and then start firing.

Isn't that weird?

Someone without intent to murder can't kill a person. If they do, it's an accident. There's still a punishment for that, of course. The only difference between "I killed him" and "I accidentally killed him" is the level of intent.

So let me ask again.

Could you kill a person?

You sell information in Shinjuku, toying with people however you like.

But you love human beings more than anyone else around. Isn't that right?

I've heard about you, Izaya Orihara.

Could you kill a person? With your own hands, I mean.

Instead, you stab them with a knife real weak so they don't die, and you pretend you're a real bad guy.

Either way, you're gonna use them, right?

You know, it's laughable what a cowardly creep you are.

Ha ha!

Ha ha ha!

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha
ha ha Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ♂♀

Chat room

{Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.}

<Easy with the laughing.>

[illegible][illegible]

<A little overboard, Tarou!>

—SETTON HAS ENTERED THE CHAT—

[Evenin'.]

{Oh, good evening.}

<And good evening to you.>

[Are you just copy-pasting that mechanical laugh? What's up, Tarou?]

{Well, what else can you do? Check out the backlogs.}

<Yah!>

{Huh?}

[Ah!]

{The backlog disappeared!}

<Heh-heh! Never overlook the power of administrator privilege!> {This is tyranny!}

[That's mean.]

[So what happened?]

{That's the thing... Kanra said something weird.}

{You know Shizuo Heiwajima, right?}

[Yes. You were talking about him?]

[I'm not sure why, but his name seems to pop up in here a lot.]

{You're right, lol. So, about Shizuo...}

|well|

[Huh?!]

|i'm going to leave for today|

{Oh, sure. Good night, Saika.}

[When did you get here, Saika?!]

<Just look at the user list, silly!> [Huh? Where is that displayed...?]

{User list?}

|i'm not used to this yet|

{Where is the user list displayed, Kanra?}

<Uh-oh. I forgot, only the admin can see it!> [Oh, Kanra... Well, either way, good evening, Saika.]

|good evening|

|i'm sorry for not saying hello|

|thank you|

|sorry|

<Why are you apologizing? lol>

—SAIKA HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

{Good night, Saika. Then again, it's only eight thirty.}

[Maybe Saika's coming from an Internet café.]

[That reminds me, there was just that armed robbery in Ikebukuro, so I hope everyone's being careful walking around the area.]

{First, a slasher, now guns? It's getting dangerous out there.}

<Let's not talk about this stuff anymore, please?> <Oh? By the way, has your PC not gotten that virus infection fixed, Saika?> <You said you met Saika off-line, right, Setton?> <Also, Ikebukuro's always been dangerous.> [Yes, a few times since then. The viruses and whatnot are fine now. She's just not used to computers yet, so I'm giving her some tips.]

[Re: always dangerous—Yes, someone I know told me that even back in the Edo period, there were many street slashers around here.]

{Oh, really?}

[Oops, sorry.]

[Looks like I have some work all of a sudden. I've got to go.]

[So long!]

{Oh, no worries.}

<Oh, Setton. You and your late-night jobs!> [Night!]

—SETTON HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

{Good night.}

<Good niight.>

<Private Mode> {...Um, so... We laughed it off earlier, but...}

<Private Mode> {People will believe what you say, Izaya, so newbies to the Net like Saika might take you seriously.}

<Private Mode> <Sorry about that, I was struck by a whim.> <Private Mode> <Plus, I thought Saika would join in on the joke. I mean, remember how Setton explained that Saika was a newbie and got hit by a nasty virus and that was the

cause of all the weird posting?> <Private Mode> {Well, that does make some sense.}

<Private Mode> <In which case, why was there that connection between the posts and the slashings?> <Private Mode> {I think it was the slasher who was spreading the virus.}

<Private Mode> {It would explain why it was trolling our chat from a bunch of computers at once.}

<Private Mode> {The kind of virus that sends instructions afterward to make you look more powerful, you know?}

<Private Mode> <That would make some sense...but consider this, would you?> <Private Mode> <What if Saika *was* the slasher?> <Private Mode> {That's not funny, either, man.}

<Private Mode> {Speaking of which, your first attempt at a "joke" was bad enough.}

<Private Mode> {Finding a way to legally kill Shizuo?}

<Private Mode> <If I could kill him with jokes, that would make my life a whole lot easier.> <Private Mode> {Besides, you can't even scratch him, he's so powerful.}

<Private Mode> <I'm not so sure. I think it might be possible, if you just find the right method.> <Private Mode> <If you rely on numbers, there's no way to kill him.> <Private Mode> <But if you throw in some extra variable...> <Private Mode> {Knock it off.}

<Private Mode> {And let me be clear... Don't try to use the Dollars for this.}

<Private Mode> <I'll handle it.>

{Well, I suppose we'll log off now.}

<Sure! Good night! ☆> {Don't use that ☆ with me.}

<Oh, fine. ∞>

{I'm not going to keep playing this game.}

—TAROU HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

—KANRA HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—



**YOU
KNOW
PERFECTLY
WELL.**



Chapter 1: You Know Perfectly Well.

Two years ago, Raira University Hospital, Ikebukuro

The boy's eyes were focused on a single mass of white.

A scene like snow beyond the glass window.

Sheets behind the window.

Sheets on the bed.

A pipe frame supporting that bed.

The ceiling and walls surrounding it all.

Even the numerous devices filling the room.

Each and every one, white.

Even the skin tone and the black floating amid the white were connected with white tubes.

That point of color was like one giant eye, which the boy felt was looking out at him.

With a pale gaze.

It was an illusion, of course; the point floating in the white was the face of a girl about his age, her eyes closed and face pointed toward the ceiling.

It was the boy himself who was creating the illusion.

The guilt that gripped him so terribly made him *wish* that she would blame him for his transgression.

He wanted to run, but he had nowhere to go. He was afraid of the guilt that would remain after he did, so he hoped that if she blamed him, at least that guilt would disappear—a shameful, cowardly hope.

But the bedridden girl was almost cruelly silent.

In fact, she could neither hear anything nor open her eyes to see anything.

Unable to even speak to her, the boy could only tremble in fear.

“Hey, isn’t that great?”

The voice was completely at odds with the gravity of the situation.

The boy didn’t bother to turn around toward it. He ground his teeth audibly.

But the owner of the voice didn’t seem to be affected in the least by the boy’s bare hostility. He continued, “So she didn’t die, huh? Lady Luck’s on your side. As long as she’s alive, you can find a way to work things out.”

“Iza...ya...,” the boy replied, the anger palpable now. The only reason he didn’t turn around and pummel Izaya Orihara was because he knew the true target of his anger was his own self.

The black-clad Izaya, who stood out in stark relief against the white hospital hallway, gave the boy a knowing smile. “You’re smart—that’s why I like you. You understand that what happened to her was because of you. It is to your great credit that you didn’t let your emotions goad you into attacking me. I’m certain that she’s grateful for that too. Can’t wait until she wakes up truly.”

At the very moment Izaya’s speech finished, the boy leaped onto him. He knew they were in a hospital, but he could find no good reason to stop himself this time.

Yet Izaya easily evaded the boy’s desperate punch by a hair’s breadth, extending a leg to knock him off-balance. He grabbed the boy’s unsteady arm and spun him down to the floor. There was no sound or impact, just the soft landing of leaves onto the ground.

Stunned that he was now sitting on the hallway tile, the boy could only stare up at the man. From below, Izaya’s smile took on a hint of shadow.

“Correct.”

“ ... ”

“You were right to turn your anger on me there. I taunted you with clear and

present malice,” Izaya cackled with no hint of remorse. He brought a finger up to his lips. “But this is a hospital. Gotta keep it quiet in here,” he taunted, turning his gaze to the girl in the room.

“In a coma, huh? I really hope she wakes up. On the other hand, perhaps you would prefer that she never opens her eyes again?”

“What does...that mean...?” the boy gasped haltingly. The anger had faded a bit, leaving only the rasp of fear.

Izaya looked down on the desperate boy. “What does it mean? You know exactly what I mean. By even asking that question, aren’t you just attempting to delude yourself into thinking you don’t know what’s going on? You’re afraid, aren’t you? If she wakes up, you might be blamed for your part in this for the rest of your life.”

“...”

“But what would happen if she dies without ever waking up? Wouldn’t that be a lifetime of guilt for you? I suppose it would be, knowing you. So whether she lives or dies, you’re left with the guilt on your conscience.”

“...”

The boy fell silent. Izaya turned to him and gently spoke words of comfort. It was as if he was doling out the forgiveness in the girl’s stead. But the actual content of those words was anything but warm.

“You can’t escape it, no matter how you struggle. No matter where you go, the past will follow you. No matter how hard you try to forget, no matter if you die and let it all disappear, the past will always be right behind you, chasing you down. Chasing, chasing, chasing, chasing... Do you know why?”

Izaya shrugged his shoulders, gesturing that even he could do nothing about this. “Because it’s lonely. The past, memories, and outcomes are all very lonely things. They want a companion.”

He stopped momentarily, leaned back against the wall, and gazed into the distance. When he spoke again, it was practically a monologue.

“I don’t believe in God. Because its existence is anything but certain.”

“ ... ”

“In a world where even the future is uncertain, the past is a great and mighty thing—because it surely existed,” he said, the grand concepts belied by the matter-of-fact tone of his voice. “Sometimes, I even think that the accumulation of the past itself should be ‘God’ to mankind.”

Simple, so simple.

“Even if the past is colored by mistakes and illusions that make it differ from reality...as long as the person involved believes it, that past becomes the truth to them.”

He could have been speaking to anyone, or perhaps even himself. But it almost seemed like he was talking to the silent girl on the other side of the glass.

“And if you use that past as the basis for your actions and your way of life, wouldn’t that make it a type of god?”

“I have no idea...what you’re trying to say,” the boy grunted, shaking his head in dead seriousness.

Izaya sighed with the trace of a bitter smile. “You know perfectly well,” the information agent said, his mouth twisted with pleasure, as he stared down at the trembling boy. His answer couldn’t have been more simple and direct. “You cannot escape her anymore. Your guilt toward her will become your past, which means that, in a way, she has become your god.”

The boy was silent. He had no choice but to feel the impact of Izaya’s words.

“She is absolute. But that’s not so bad, is it? After all...you love her, don’t you?”

Even as the boy accepted that truth, he wanted nothing more than to expel it from his being.

It was two days later that she regained consciousness.

When the girl, who had no family, opened her eyes at last, the boy was not there.

Masaomi Kida had fled from her.

Even though he knew, as Izaya said, he could never escape her.

He couldn't find an answer other than to run. That was his only reason.

Time passed.

The girl became Masaomi's past, and thus she gripped his heart.

Even as she lived, she became the past.



Present day, Raira University Hospital, Ikebukuro

In the quiet of the hospital, slightly removed from the bustle of the train station, the boy stared out at the sky through the window.

He thought on the serial slashings that had gripped the city just a few weeks earlier.

On the night that fifty people were attacked by the slasher, Ikebukuro went into a minor panic. It made front-page headlines in the papers the next day, turning the “slasher” incident into national news.

But meanwhile, on that same night, a number of different events converged, sending certain official institutions—particularly the police and hospitals—into even greater confusion than the media had reported.

Immediately after the slashing happened, a large-scale brawl broke out nearby, which caused the hospital to be flooded with nearly a hundred emergency patients. At least, that's what the boy heard.

The boy, Masaomi Kida, had no direct connection to this brawl, but he knew several people who'd fallen victim to the various incidents, and he was paying hospital visits nearly every day.

Those friends were all out now, which meant that Masaomi had no need to come back to the hospital, but here he was.

He was standing at the open window of the private room, schoolbag slung over his shoulder, enjoying the breeze.

“It's cold, Masaomi.”

He shut the window without turning around to face the speaker. “Oh, sorry.”

There was a wry grimace on his face, but his eyes were looking at his own smile in the reflection of the glass. He was checking to see that his expression was properly formed.



“You won’t...look at me.”

“ ...”

A silence fell onto the room. Eventually, the girl spoke up in a gentle voice that echoed off the walls.

“So your friend is in the hospital now?”

“...Who told you that?”

He hadn’t spoken a word about Anri and his other friends to the owner of the voice. Masaomi turned around, his eyes full of conflicting emotion, to look at the girl sitting up in the hospital bed. She ignored his question and said, “I saw you from the window. You came every day. Was it a girl?”

“Yeah. Glasses, nice body... Just a perfect example of a teenage girl whose imbalance makes her attractive,” Masaomi joked rather than deny it.

The girl was not shaken by his answer. She only smiled as she got further to the point. “You like her?”

“Yeah... She goes to my school. I’m in a love triangle with my good friend,” Masaomi noted, only adding fuel to the fire. But the girl—Saki Mikajima—seemed delighted.

“Oh? You must be serious if you’re throwing yourself into a three-way romance like that. I can barely remember you getting involved with a girl for anything other than a fling,” Saki giggled.

Masaomi silently turned back to the window. The entrance to the hospital was clearly visible from the fifth-floor room. If you were good at picking apart faces and clothes with sharp vision, and you had all the time in the world to gaze out the window, you might be able to pick out who was coming, Masaomi noticed.

Meanwhile, Saki’s smile never left her face. “But I need to correct you first.”

She tilted her pale neck, the short hair that framed her face bobbing slightly.

“If you include me, it’s a romantic square.”

“Stop right there, Saki. Just stop. Close your mouth, breathe through your nose, and listen,” Masaomi interjected, cutting short what could have been

taken as either serious or a joke. He looked straight into his own eyes in the window's reflection. "What we had—it's over now. Finished. Closing time. Past expiration date. Got that?"

"If we're over, why do you keep showing up?"

"..."

Masaomi looked to be formulating an answer, but Saki continued before he could speak.

"In fact...you've started visiting a lot more recently. Did something happen?" she asked briskly. He held his silence.

In the reflection of the window, the girl's face held a gentle smile, but nothing moved aside from her lips. Perhaps she had grown too used to holding that expression.

"Could it be...that you want to go back to the old days again?"

"...Sorry. Gonna go home for today."

It was a weak attempt to change the topic. Masaomi lifted his hand in a brief wave to Saki, then stepped out of the room. As he left, her voice held just a touch more emotion than before.

"You'll be back, Masaomi."

He put a hand on the door, trying to block her voice out. He'd heard what she would say next over and over and over. He focused only on leaving, not on the content of the words.

"After all, it's already decided. Which is why I don't mind at all if you fall in love with other girls. Because in the very, very end, you'll still love me more than them."

Saki knew full well that Masaomi wasn't listening. She spoke the words to the empty room.

They were meant for herself more than him.

"So until that moment arrives, you need to love many, many girls, Masaomi."

So many words, right into the wheelchair at the side of her bed.

“So many, you might forget about me. I don’t want you to keep yourself from being happy, just because you’re worried about me. Instead, I want you to go out with all kinds of girls, have many romances, learn to love and be loved, until you forget all about me.”

So many, many words.

“Since in the end, you’ll still come back to me, you know. And for all the mountains of love you built with other people over the years, your love for me will stand even higher, higher, higher. It will happen—it will happen without a doubt. After all...”

Saki’s paradoxical words spilled into the void.

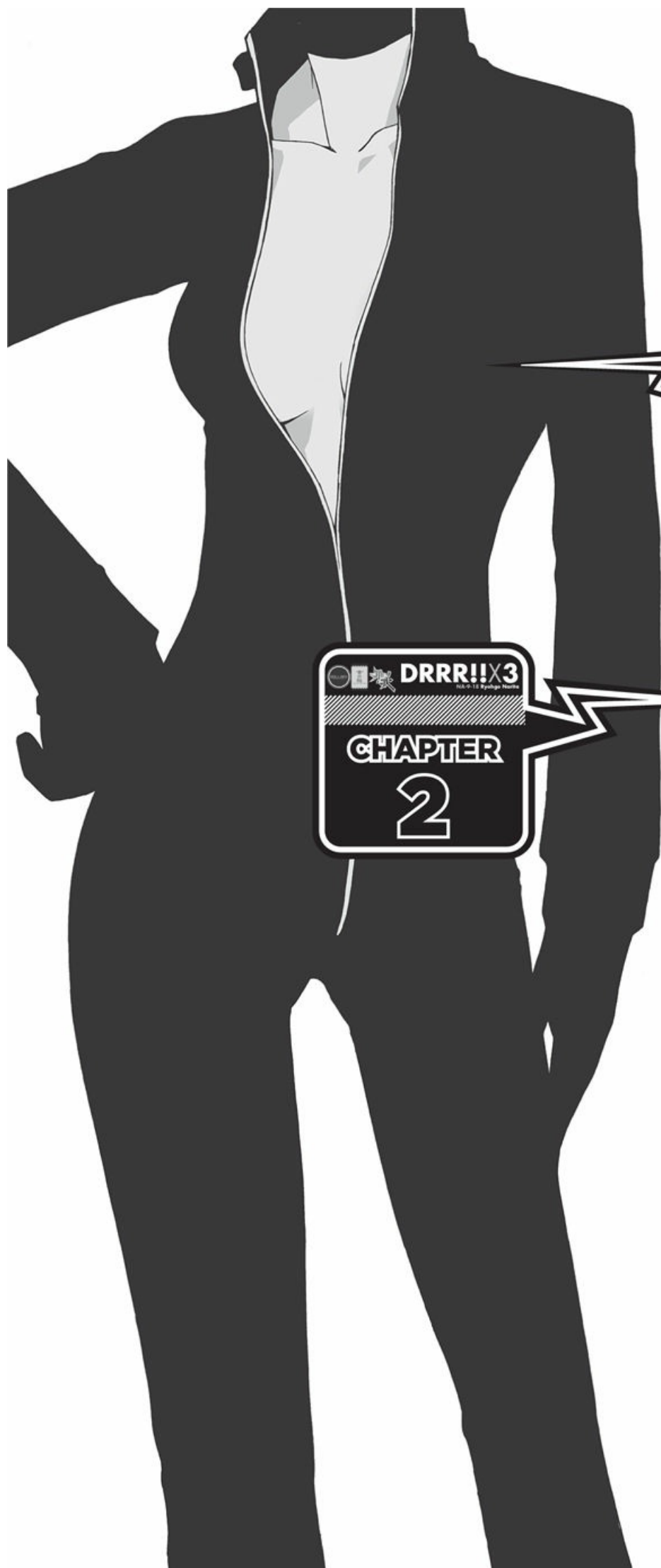
Her smile stayed in place, reaching nothing but the empty room.

Without end.

“That’s what Izaya said.”

She smiled and smiled.

Without end.



**THAT WAS
INDEED
A
MONSTER.**



Chapter 2: That Was Indeed a Monster.

In a city where even the night is brimming with light, there is a monster.

(Yes, a monster that was indeed a monster.)

Another member of the city wandered in the darkness tonight, soon to be gripped by the fear of that creature.



Ikebukuro

As she straddled the headlightless motorcycle, she was certain that she was being followed.

Her bike's engine made no sound.

And yet, she was easily traveling over thirty-five miles an hour. That alone made her an eerie sight, but even through her helmet, she could sense the shadow closing in on her.

She didn't have to look into her side mirror. She could *sense* her surroundings through her back.

It's the police.

Her grip on the handlebars relaxed as the shadow wafted within her helmet.

There was no need for undue fear as long as she understood what she was facing, that it wasn't some unexplained menace. Of course, to people unfamiliar with the process, being pursued by the police *was* an inexplicable and menacing experience—but to Celty Sturluson, it was an encounter with which she was somewhat familiar.

She took care to follow traffic safety laws in all cases outside of an emergency, but there was no hiding the lack of a license plate and lights. She couldn't possibly pay a ticket if she got pulled over. Celty didn't even have a driver's

license, so getting arrested would lead to a chain reaction of ugly consequences.

A self-deprecating smile flitted across Celty's mind.

Breaking the law or not, if I get caught, I've got bigger problems.

She silently focused her consciousness on the multiple squad bikes approaching her from the rear.

It's not like the law of Japan can do anything with me once they've got me.

Oblivious to Celty's confidence, the police motorcycles picked up speed bit by bit, approaching her rear quietly but surely.

Then, I guess I need to give them a show.

She sped up, daring them to react, pulling the black bike into a wide parking lot on the side of the road.

To convince them that this is pointless.

The cops closed in, four in all. It was a bit much just to stop one motorcycle, but apparently even that wasn't enough—one of the officers was using his radio to call for more backup.

You need to learn that the very idea of catching me is futile.

At her back was the wall of a building and a fence of inorganic color.

At her feet, cracked asphalt and white lines demarcating parking spaces.

Overhead, the faded, blurred moonlight dimmed by the surrounding neon.

With the surroundings just right, Celty was now ready to reveal her true nature.

She took off her helmet to show them.

The motorcycle officers had been following commonsense procedures according to what they knew was normal. But now they recognized an abnormality.

There was no head where there should have been beneath the helmet. From the cross section of her neck, black smoke spilled like some kind of out-of-control humidifier.

That in this world, there are monsters that surpass all human understanding.

To impress her nature upon them, the being atop the black motorcycle reached out—and controlled the night lights with her own shadow.

The seeping shadow instantly spread, forming a mist that clouded the officers' vision. This mist only existed for a span of several seconds until the particles of shadow contracted, materializing into a weapon in Celty's hands.

But it was far too ugly and warped to be called a weapon. It had a handle about ten feet long, twice Celty's height, ending in a pitch-black scythe just as long. It was the kind of object found on the Death tarot card, lit by a powerful light to project a large shadow against a wall, then cut out and turned into a real object. Endless, spotless, black, black, black.

More shadow exuded from Celty's back, erupting upward into wings just as black as the scythe that enveloped her body.

At the same time, the previously silent bike's engine roared into life.

As it brayed with the sound of a great beast's dying roar, Celty swung her enormous scythe, completing the image of her true self—a creature not of this world. A headless dullahan.



Celty Sturluson was not human.

She was a type of fairy commonly known as a dullahan, found from Scotland to Ireland—a being that visits the homes of those close to death to inform them of their impending mortality.

The dullahan carried its own severed head under its arm, rode on a two-wheeled carriage called a Coiste Bodhar pulled by a headless horse, and approached the homes of the soon to die. Anyone foolish enough to open the door was drenched with a basin full of blood. Thus the dullahan, like the banshee, made its name as a herald of ill fortune throughout European folklore.

One theory claimed that the dullahan bore a strong resemblance to the Norse Valkyrie, but Celty had no way of knowing if this was true.

It wasn't that she *didn't* know. More accurately, she just couldn't remember.

When someone back in her homeland stole her head, she lost her memories of what she was. It was the search for the faint trail of her head that had brought her here to Ikebukuro.

Now with a motorcycle instead of a headless horse and a riding suit instead of armor, she had wandered the streets of this neighborhood for decades.

But ultimately, she had not succeeded at retrieving her head, and her memories were still lost. And she was fine with that.

As long as she could stay with those human beings she loved and who accepted her, she could live the way she was now.

She was a headless woman who let her actions speak for her missing face and held this strong, secret desire within her heart.

That was Celty Sturluson in a nutshell.



Instantly dragged against their wills into a display of the abnormal, the motorcycle cops panicked, which gave Celty an easy window of escape. Naturally, none of them would dare to follow her—or so she assumed.

Sadly, reality was not so kind.

Even to a monster to whom reality had only a tenuous connection, reality was cruel to all.

“It’s always been on my mind,” muttered one of the motorcycle cops to himself, seemingly the central figure of the four men, his face shadowed by his helmet.

—?

This was not the reaction she expected.

Celty concentrated on the officer’s long soliloquy, feeling that something was definitely wrong.

“Always, always. When things like you show up in manga and movies, we’re always the *punching bags*. By the time the hero with his superpowers shows up, we’re always lying in a pool of our own blood, just to show off how tough your kind is.”

This didn't seem to have anything to do with his actual job, but none of the other officers showed any disagreement with the sentiment. Celty began to feel unsettled that the men were not panicking at her scythe or lack of head.

"But that's all right. Because on the flip side, they only depict us that way because we're considered real tough in real life. It's a necessary evil when telling a story. Yep, absolutely true. But there's one thing I've always wanted to say to any true monster or evil psychic or cyborg or ninja."

...What in the world is he babbling about?

Celty watched the muttering cop with suspicion and spread her shadow again.

It just wasn't enough. She hadn't used enough yet.

None of this meant anything if it wasn't threatening her opponent. She was producing this shadow specifically for its mental effect. But after a reaction like this, she wasn't sure what to do anymore.

Undaunted by any of this, the man murmured, "Just one thing. Just one thing I want to say. And that is..."

He squeezed the accelerator sleeve on his right handlebar.

"Don't fuck with traffic cops, monster."

The engine roared, 180 degrees the opposite of the sound the black motorcycle made, and the other bikes joined in, gunning their throttles. Meanwhile, she could hear the backup motorcycles and squad cars approaching in the distance.

The traffic officer directly in front of Celty suddenly looked up. His face was pleasant. But his eyes glimmered dangerously.

"I'll say it again."

His gaze, brighter than any headlight, cut mercilessly through Celty's hesitation.

"Learn your lesson, monster. *Don't fuck with traffic cops.*"



Near Kawagoe Highway, top floor of apartment building

The sound of a door slamming open.

The owner of the apartment, Shinra Kishitani, spun around to see the figure of his beloved cotenant, her shoulders trembling. She was holding her helmet in her hand for some reason, making no effort to hide her lack of head.

“Welcome home, Cel...whuh?!”

Before Shinra could finish his greeting, Celty leaped into her partner’s arms. In the midst of his powerful embrace, her body shook and quaked.

“Huh? Wha...what’s up?! This kind of physical intimacy is the greatest of honors, my lady. Er, wait, there’s a better way to say that... Uh, hang on. Are you trembling?! No, really, what’s wrong?! Celty? Celtyyy?!”

Several minutes later, once Celty had finally calmed down, she typed her thoughts into the laptop set up on the dinner table.

Shadows split and split again from her fingertips, enabling her to type much faster than any human could. As a sign of her panic, she was even typing in such a way that entirely mimicked human conversation.

“I was s-s-so s-s-scared, so scared, Shinra! P-p-police these days are monsters!”

“Police...?”

“Yes, a monster, that was indeed a monster! There were nearly a dozen motorcycles and patrol cars chasing me around like a beast with one mind... I swung my scythe around with abandon, but rather than scattering them, that just made them chase me harder! They evaded with perfect precision and maintained the pressure! Each and every bike was like a missile coming after me!”

Her fear was so great that Celty jumped from time to time just by looking at the string of text she was typing. Shinra had his arm around her back, gently enveloping the Black Rider suit in an attempt to calm her nerves.

“I figured that a little menace from my end would frighten them off, and that was always good enough before this, but today, the traffic cops chased me around like one single creature. Even when I brought out a scythe that was like

thirty feet long, they didn't budge. They just kept coming after me!"

"Calm down, Celty. You're just repeating yourself."

"I-I rode onto the highway, but the highway patrol already had an ambush waiting for me! I only got away by fleeing onto the Raira Academy campus..."

"Yeah... Speaking of the traffic patrol of the Metropolitan Police Department Fifth District...you were doing such a good job of zipping around evading them that they called in some real crack troops from elsewhere," Shinra explained calmly, hoping to soothe her agitated nerves. "There's the Kuzuharas at the police box just outside the station; almost the whole family are police. Well, one of them is named Kinnosuke Kuzuhara, and he's a problem officer who often pressures his targets so much in traffic that they cause accidents. If you think of him as a new officer called here to be a rival to you, it makes you feel like your life has meaning now, doesn't it?"

"I don't need a rival to chase me around like Freddy Krueger to make things exciting!" Celty typed, then calmed down at last and continued at a more even pace. *"It was scary. So scary. I got overconfident. Very overconfident. I promise I will live my life with humility and modesty. Please forgive me—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."*

"Who are you apologizing to?" Shinra wondered with a smirk, peering at Celty. "For being a headless fairy, you sure are a scaredy-cat."

"Shut up... I'm not scared of ghosts or vampires," she rebutted unconvincingly.

Shinra cackled. "Is that so? You were afraid of aliens the other day, and I remember the way you were terrified out of your wits after reading that collection of horror manga short stories."

"I can't help it! Just think of that kind of horror happening in reality... Think of your own face flying through the sky and strangling you or slugs dripping out of your mouth! That's scary!"

The thought of the manga made Celty's body tense again. Meanwhile, Shinra stared at her with the care of one watching an adorable pet and sighed.

"It just sounds like a joke, coming from you. It's strange, though... Maybe being such an abnormal thing causes you to mix up reality and fiction much

easier than the rest of us.”

Celty sulked into her laptop.

“Aliens aren’t fiction! There are plenty of mysteries out there in the universe!”

“Well, you can stop trembling over harmless mysteries... Especially when you just laugh off the ghosts and goblins. That cowardly nature isn’t the Celty I know. The only time you need to show off your vulnerable side is in bed with m—
Hurgh!! Y-yeah...that’s more like it...”

With one fist wedged firmly into Shinra’s stomach, Celty typed away with her free hand.

“Don’t get embarrassing on me now. At any rate... I bet I could win a fight against a ghost, but I have no idea what sort of super-science an alien might use. Who knows, those patrol officers could just be grays wearing human bodies.”

“Wow, you must have really been frightened... Well, I hate to bring this up after you were so scared out there,” Shinra said apologetically, slowly recovering from the damage of the body blow, “but would you mind going back out to Ikebukuro Station?”

A long silence.

Celty’s shoulders rose up and down as if taking deep breaths. She put on her trusty helmet and slowly typed out, *“Honestly? I don’t want to. I can probably avoid being spotted by the police, but...is it a sudden job?”*

“I just need you to pick someone up.”

“Who?”

Shinra was uncharacteristically hesitant in answering his beloved’s question. “Someone who just came back from America. And...he’s going to live right next to this apartment.”

He took a deep breath, then finally gave her the answer.

“So, yeah... My dad’s back.”



Ikebukuro Station, west exit, outside the Metropolitan Theatre

Celty met Shinra Kishitani, her lover and roommate, shortly after losing her head.

It all started when young Shinra found her hiding spot on the ship out of Ireland where she was stowing away, following the trail of her head. After that, she got a place to stay in Japan, owing to the help of Shinra's father—but thanks to his so-called “research” vivisection, using anesthetics that didn't even work on her, she did not have a fondness for the man.

In fact, at present Celty suspected that it was Shinra's father himself who had actually stolen her head. She couldn't corner him until she had proper proof of it, but she was always wary of him.

She wanted to tell him that he could get a taxi himself, but he had used the proper channels to call upon her services as a courier.

He's always tried to needle me like that. Some things never change...

Celty made her way to West Gate Park, evading the watchful eye of the police. Once there, she cast her senses around the area.

Though it was nearly eleven o'clock, there was still a surprising number of people about. Those who noticed the now-infamous Black Rider stopped momentarily, but a quick turn of Celty's helmet in their direction caused their gazes to dart away.

It was under these circumstances that Celty waited for her client.

“You'll recognize him right away. He's wearing his usual outfit.”

Shinra's words as she left the apartment repeated in her head.

I always thought his outfit was pretty silly...but I guess I have no room to speak, Celty thought, recalling the sight of Shinra's father before he left for America. She made a head-holding gesture and shook the helmet left and right.

At the same time, she noticed one point of interest in her surroundings. There was a group of people with yellow heads visible through the darkness on the road bordering the far end of the park.

The yellow wasn't bleached hair, but bandannas that the group of boys all

wore tied around their foreheads.

Yellow Scarves.

They were a color gang that was growing rapidly in influence, based around a *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* motif. Celty could recall seeing them here and there in Ikebukuro and Shinjuku over the last few years, until the whole color gang fad seemed to vanish recently.

And now they're growing again... What are they doing over there? Celty wondered, focusing on the group.

A white shadow stood in the midst of the yellow.

Ugh.

Celty recognized the identity of that white shadow. Inside her mind, she heaved a sigh, then rode her Coiste Bodhar silently toward the gathering.

Trembling at the possibility of police surveillance all the while.

“Hey, pal. Real cool look you’ve got going on.”

“Real wicked. Or is that wacky?”

The young men wearing yellow bandannas surrounded a single, seemingly middle-aged man. They hobbled awkwardly due to their baggy pants.

“Blurp, blub!”

One of them even took a swig of juice and spat it out onto the ground next to him in an odd attempt at intimidation.

Meanwhile, the seemingly middle-aged man surveyed the youths around him with stoic placidity. He was “seemingly” middle-aged because the boy could not accurately guess at the man’s age.

They had picked their target and surrounded a man in white—a single man clad in white, like a polar opposite of Celty’s black.

Not every inch of him was white. Over his funereal black suit, he wore a white lab coat that was slightly too large for his height. In one hand he held a pure white briefcase.

Standing along the road outside the train station in a lab coat was strange

enough on its own, but what truly set him apart and concealed his age from observers was the gas mask covering his face.

Again, pure white.

Even the filter affixed over the mouthpiece of the mask and the bands that strapped the mask to the head were all white. With his face hidden from view, the only detail the boys used to conjecture that he was middle-aged was the graying of about half his hair.

Both his transitioning hair color and the skin color peeking out here and there were overshadowed by the pure snow-whiteness of the gas mask.

Even the eyes of the mask were made of white glass, like negatives of sunglasses. It made him look like some sort of bizarre silkworm.

Within the setting of urban Ikebukuro, he looked nothing short of insane.

If you're going to dress like that, at least save it for Harajuku or Akihabara...

Celty recognized the man from afar. It was clear that based on the manga, novels, and dubious tabloids she read, Celty thought of Harajuku and Akihabara as mystical places where anything goes.

And sure enough, he's gotten himself into trouble...

There was no doubting it now.

Celty was sure it was him.

If anything, she simply wanted to believe that there were not multiple people who would dress like that.

So if her hopes were true, that meant the man in white was Shingen Kishitani—Shinra's father.

The boys crowded around the bizarre, almost exhibitionistic man like he was some kind of creature in a zoo, totally unaware of Celty's steady approach.

"Listen, pal, we're in a bad mood 'cause we've been on the lookout for a slasher who's in hiding. I mean, we're crazy pissed. And you're crazy suspicious."

"So is it all right if we do a little inspection?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't—*blorp*—mind if we examine your wallet. *Blorp, blup.*"

One of the men approached him, spilling carbonated soda from his mouth. Shingen took a step away from him and spoke at last.

“The air in Tokyo is so dirty. Don’t you agree?”

“Huhh?” one of the boys growled.

Meanwhile, Shingen only shook his head in lamentation and mumbled through the gas mask. “Of course, those filthy faces of yours seem uniquely adapted to the wretched air. A form of camouflage, if you will. And not just that—the stain extends to your eyes. You do not even see the extent to which the filth penetrates you.”

“I dunno, I think this dude might be leakin’ something, if you catch my drift.”

The boys reacted to the man’s obvious insult not with anger, but suspicion and confusion.

“Yeah...no worries, though,” one of them said and poured the remains of his beverage onto Shingen’s head. Large stains grew on the pristine lab coat, and a sweet smell wafted through the air.

Shingen remained silent for a moment, then shook his head again and lamented, “Ahem. Well, it seems the time has come for you to understand what a grown man can do... You may think that being minors under the protection of juvenile law renders you immune from harm if you choose to kill another person—well, think harder! When you attempt to kill a man, you have to be fully aware of the possibility that *he* might kill you first!”

The instant he finished this imperious speech, the member of the group most difficult to label a “boy” grabbed Shingen roughly by the collar.

“Ah! Ow!”

“Yeah, I think this dude really is leaking brains.”

He stood on Shingen’s shoe and began jabbing his thumb into the man’s ribs.

“Listen up, I’m over twenty!”

“Agh! Ah! W-wait a minute. Ouch, that really hurts! I can’t get away because you’re stepping—ow!—on my shoe! Your thumb is—ow!—stabbing me really hard! Ow, ow, ow!”

“Huh?! I can’t hear you. Huh?!”

With every “Huh?!” the young man drove his extended thumb between the ribs. While unthreatening, the powerful and speedy attack caused Shingen to yelp in surprise.

“What are you doing just standing there, Celty? Hurry up and come to my aid!” he shouted over the boys’ heads, which caused them all to turn around.

They saw a black shadow.

Do I have to...?

Celty seriously considered responding to the cry for help by pretending she had seen nothing and going back home. All the while, Shingen continued yelping.

“Didn’t you put it together that the reason I spoke down to them like this was because I saw you standing behind them and knew I was safe?! I know you’re not the kind of person who would betray my trust!”

I really don’t want to do this...

Celty was truly about to turn on her heel when she was stopped by a sudden shout from one of the boys.

“Hey! That’s the Black Rider!”

“That’s the one, Mr. Horada! It was the dude dressed like a bartender with the Black Rider who did us in!”

“You got a lot to answer for, punk. Yeah?!”

“How you gonna pay for what that bartender did to us?”

Are these the guys who...?

And then Celty remembered.

Several weeks earlier, on the evening of the great mass slashing called the “Night of the Ripper,” the friend she’d been escorting on her motorcycle had flattened a group of the Yellow Scarves who had dared to stare him down.

She didn’t recall the faces of the people he punched, but based on the way they were screaming, these had to be the same boys.

Oh, geez.

Celty pulled her PDA from her waist, hoping to find some way to explain the situation to the angry gang, except—

“What you doin’ with that? You think this is a joke? Huh?”

One of them smacked her hand, sending the not-inexpensive PDA clattering to the asphalt.

The next instant, the shadow seeping from Celty’s body instantly spread throughout the area, clinging to the boys’ feet.

“Whua?!”

“Wh-what is this shit?!”

“H-hyaa!”

The boys screamed, stumbled, and fell as their legs were caught by the sudden appearance of the black, ropy shadows, quick as snakes and sticky as leeches.

Meanwhile, Celty retrieved her PDA. Once she was sure the crystal screen still worked, she calmed down a bit.

Good, it’s not broken.

She clutched the PDA Shinra had given her as a present and turned back, done playing around. She was about to grab Shingen’s hand and drag him away from the scene, when...



“Hey, you! Black Rider! What’s the big idea—?”

“Yah.”

“Guh?!”

—?!

Shingen, who was standing right behind the young man who’d boasted that he was over twenty, swung his briefcase down on the back of the punk’s head. It was a tremendous, centrifugal arc with arms at full extension.

The sound it made was much lighter than Celty expected, but the man crumpled to the ground anyway, eyes rolled back and blood trailing from his head.

While everyone else was stunned into silence, Shingen glared down at his fallen victim imposingly.

“See that...? That’s...how a grown man fights.”

What in the world are you doing, you clown?!

Celty could sense that they were attracting more attention from the surrounding area, so she grabbed Shingen’s hand and practically dragged him away toward her trusty black bike.

“Just a moment, Celty. There are three more of them left.”

“*Shut up,*” she typed briefly into the PDA before tucking it back away.

The motorcycle silently ran up to the corner of the Metropolitan Theatre, but then she remembered that there was a police station on the other side and quickly wheeled into a U-turn.

The fear she felt earlier in the evening returned, shivering up her back.

“Oh...did you just shiver, Celty? Was it a shiver in response to a sensation of cold? A mental reaction? The workings of some sensory apparatus unfamiliar to humanity? How fascinating. You’ll have to allow me to dissect you again—*Gwffh!!*”

She planted her knee in his back and hung her helmet.

He's just like Shinra, but...I simply can't find it in me to like him...



“You saved me, Celty. Not only that, you helped me teach the leaders of tomorrow a harsh lesson about life, at the mere price of screaming pain in my serratus posterior inferior and abdominal oblique.”

Shingen was rubbing his ribs with one hand while he clung to Celty's back with the other.

The contrast of pure white and black atop the dark motorcycle was striking in the back alleys. They would stick out like nothing else on the main roads, and if they were caught, they'd likely be charged with excessive force in self-defense.

With her boyfriend's father—the very man responsible for that excessive force—seated behind her, she could do nothing but pray that the squad of police motorcycles wouldn't spot them.

Meanwhile, Shingen continued chattering away into his gas mask. “The thing about that attack is, it wouldn't really work against a proper fighter—a boxer, say, with powerful abdominal muscles. Sadly, I do not have well-trained abs, so there will be a bruise for quite some time, if not actual interior damage.”

Hope it hurts like hell.

If Celty had actually had teeth to grind, they would have been audible right now. She tried to imagine herself with a head, but the realization that the number one suspect in its theft was sitting behind her just made her depressed.

She slowed her speed through the back alleys, trying to find something else to think about, settling on the earlier gang of boys.

Because there were so many members of the Yellow Scarves, they were a threat if they wanted to be. At worst, they might pinpoint the location of the apartment where she lived with Shinra.

She knew that she could get by without being trailed all the way back, but their numbers were concerning. Celty couldn't say for certain that one of them who happened to live nearby might not catch sight of her returning home by coincidence.

It's weird, though, Celty thought, noticing something about the Yellow

Scarves. *They just picked a fight with Shizuo not too long ago...*

Shizuo was the name of the friend who had flattened the previous group of boys a few weeks back. Celty consulted her memories of the more distant past.

The Yellow Scarves were not always such an aggressive bunch, she knew. They might squabble among other kids, but they didn't seem to be the type to pick fights with older adults or go hunting for victims late at night.

Then again, the idiot in the gas mask is dressed like a perfect mark. Then again, I don't have room to speak about unusual appearances, either. Huh? So does that mean a few weeks back...they were picking a fight with me, not Shizuo?

If that was the case, she owed Shizuo an apology for getting him involved. But there was something else eating away at her.

She was remembering what one of the members of that group had shouted: *"Listen up, I'm over twenty!"*

Before, the Yellow Scarves were just middle schoolers... They should be in high school at the most by now. I didn't think they would be pulling older people into their group...

While this did bother her, the apartment building was within sight, so her thought process hastily wrapped the issue up.

Then again, strange things happen with large enough gatherings. They're not necessarily representative of the whole. Ha-ha! Just like us.

The organization that she herself was aligned with suddenly passed through her mind. She trembled slightly with a silent chuckle.

The Dollars aren't much different.

The motorcycle bearing shadows white and black passed into the building's underground parking lot unseen. The night moved onward in Ikebukuro.

Though she herself was an extremely abnormal being, her very normal life quietly vanished into the darkness.

But the disquiet of that question remained upon her heart.

Chat room

{I'm seeing more people in yellow around town these days.}

[Yellow?]

<No kidding. They're more visible than the Dollars now, since you can identify them easily.> [Oh, you mean the Yellow Scarves?]

[They do seem to be on the rise.]

<Ah, you're aware of them, too, Setton?> [Yes, well...they've been around for years.]

[But...I don't know, something's changed with them recently.]

{Changed?}

[I don't know how to describe it. They're not like the old Yellow Scarves... They seem to be going in a different direction.]

[It feels like they're more violent than they used to be.]

{You seem to know your stuff, Setton.}

<That's incredible! I'm too scared to go around observing them all the time, so I wasn't aware of aaany of this at aaall.> {Do you happen to know someone in the group?}

[Oh no, that's not the case.]

—SAIKA HAS ENTERED THE CHAT—

{Oh! Good evening, Saika.}

[Evenin'.]

<Welcome!>

|good evening. um, sorry|

{Why are you apologizing? lol}

<Saika always apologizes right off the bat. That first time was because you weren't used to the Internet yet, and you got hit with a virus, right? You can't help that!> |sorry|

|sorry|

[Too much apologizing, ha-ha.]

{Anyway, we were just talking about the Yellow Scarves.}

<Do you know about them?>

|from the romance of the three kingdoms?|

[Well, yes, but more specifically, it's a gang named after that.]

|oh, the people wearing yellow scraps around town?|

[Yes, those are the ones.]

{Have you seen them, Saika?}

<I'm telling you, pretty much anyone living in Ikebukuro has seen them.>

|sorry, yes, i have|

<Don't apologize, lol.>

|sorry|

<Speaking of which...seems like the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves are in a touchy situation right now.> [Oh?]

|what is the dollars?|

{Oh, you don't know about the Dollars.}

|sorry|

{No, look, you don't have to keep apologizing.}

<Private Mode> {...Is it true, Izaya?}

<Private Mode> <Yep, dead serious. Though I'm sure you've heard about it, too.> <Private Mode> <The Yellow Scarves are on edge because they think the slasher might have been in the Dollars.> <Private Mode> {I see...}

[The Dollars are a group of young people, a lot like the Yellow Scarves.]

[They just don't stand out as much, because they don't have an easy identifier.]

<Both groups have been in a precarious state ever since the slashings.> |huh|

|what do you mean?|

[It's not really worth explaining to someone who doesn't know the details.]

<That's not true, Setton. If you live in Ikebukuro, you ought to know!> <Let's see. The slashing hit both the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves, but it seems like each side suspects the other of orchestrating the whole thing.> <And after all, they never caught who did it.> <After the Night of the Ripper, the whole thing just stopped abruptly.> <There's lots of speculation flying around in every direction.> <And both the Yellow Scarves and Dollars suffered losses due to the attacks.> <So both sides are eager to find the attacker to preserve their reputations.> {...The Dollars aren't that fixated on reputation, though.}

{I think they just want vengeance for their friends.}

<And that's how we've arrived at the current situation!> {So...I don't think either side understands the other very well... There's lots of misunderstandings going around.}

|i see, thank you|

<Private Mode> [I'm sorry. But you really don't need to worry about this, Anri.]

<Private Mode> [It's just people who don't know the truth getting worked up about it.]

<Private Mode> [I don't think you'd do this, but turning yourself in would have no real effect on any of this. You're not even the real mastermind.]

<Private Mode> [You shouldn't rush to a hasty decision.]

<Private Mode> [And the police out there are scary right now...really scary! Especially the traffic cops!]

|i'm sorry, thank you|

{?}

<Private Mode> [Oops. I need to teach you how to use private mode sometime.]

<Private Mode> [Anyway, we can talk about this some more another time. Okay?]

<Either way, if both sides don't find the real slasher and crush them together, it could be raining blood in Ikebukuro pretty soon... It's scary stuff. Gang warfare!> {...I'll be praying it doesn't come to that.}

|um, sorry|

|i'm going to leave now|

{Oh, sure. Thanks for coming on, Saika.}

<Have a good night. ☆>

—**SAIKA HAS LEFT THE CHAT**—

<Private Mode> [I'm really sorry. You shouldn't let it bother you.]

<Private Mode> [Oops, too late.]

[Night, Saika!]

[Oops, just a second too late...]

[In addition to being late, I think I'm going to log off for tonight.]

<Huh? Isn't that a bit early for you, Setton?> [I've got a guest staying over.]

[Anyways, night!]

<Okay!>

{Talk to you later.}

—**SETTON HAS LEFT THE CHAT**—

<Private Mode> {Those weird things that the virus was causing Saika to post...}

<Private Mode> {You think they have something to do with the slashings after all?}

<Private Mode> <That's what I'm looking into now. I'll tell you if I find out anything...for a low, low price.> <Private Mode> {If only the police would catch this guy already...}

<Private Mode> {It would make things so much clearer and help us avoid fighting with the Yellow Scarves...}

<Private Mode> <I'm not so sure. Neither the Yellow Scarves nor the Dollars

are just one monolithic entity.> <Private Mode> <Some people are going to start extorting others for their own personal profit under the guise of “gang rivalry.”>
<Private Mode> <After enough of that, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.>
<Private Mode> {Well...I won't let it happen.}

<Private Mode> <We'll see.>

<Private Mode> <I don't think you can stop it from happening at this point.>
<Private Mode> <Besides, you have no control over the Yellow Scarves.> <Private Mode> {Even still...I won't let it happen.}

<Private Mode> <Hmm...well, I'll look forward to seeing you try.>

<Welp, gotta go!>

{Nice talking to you.}

—KANRA HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

{And now...}

—TAROU HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—



WHY...?

A large, vertical rectangular box with a black background and white text. The text "WHY...?" is written in a bold, sans-serif font. A jagged line extends from the left side of the box, pointing towards the character's head.



Chapter 3: Why...?

Raira Academy, near the front gate

Raira Academy was a private high school located fairly close to Ikebukuro Station.

Though it was a private school, its scholastic rank and tuition were only average, which, combined with its proximity to downtown, made it quite a popular school to attend. Parents typically expressed resistance, but for students coming from distant regions, it held a distinct, powerful allure.

And like any other school, it served as a meeting place for students of all different types, facilitating the creation of groups of like-minded teens, and occasionally very *unlikely* combinations as well.

After the closing bell dismissed the student populace, these little groups of varied friends gathered and dispersed to their own destinations.

“So I was wondering,” the boy said, straight-faced, in the sunset light that flooded the campus, “what makes you so cute and sexy, Anri?”

The boy and girl listening to him instantly gave their typical reactions.

The bespectacled girl blushed in consternation and mumbled, “Uh...what?”

While the reserved-looking boy shook his head in disappointment. “Not sexy... You shouldn’t say that, Masaomi.”

Masaomi, who was recognizable by his brown hair and earrings, grinned impishly. “Ahh, I see... So Mikado admits that she’s cute, even if he doesn’t think she’s sexy!”

“Wha...? Uh, no. I mean...”

“No? So you’re saying she’s not cute to begin with?”

“No, that’s not what I—! Y-yes, she’s cute!”

The girl’s face got redder and redder.

“Okay, so you will admit she’s cute... But what I’m saying is, she’s not just cute, but really sexy, and that’s what makes her a total babe. So by viewing her as a sex symbol where you don’t, I understand her more...which means I love her more! And therefore, I win!”

“Hey, who made you judge of that?!” protested his childhood friend, Mikado Ryuugamine. Masaomi side-eyed him and turned to the girl, Anri Sonohara, who was looking flustered between the two boys.

“Well, anyhoo, I’m glad that Anri’s fully recovered from her injuries.”

“Yes, that’s a very good thing!”

“Uh, um...thank you, both of you...”

Prompted by the boys’ smiles, Anri clumsily put on the best grin she could manage.

Mikado Ryuugamine.

Masaomi Kida.

Anri Sonohara.

It was the trio that perhaps most powerfully exuded an aura of “closeness” to other students at Raira Academy. In terms of romantic couples, Seiji Yagiri and Mika Harima in Class A were most famous, but the peaceful romantic triangle between these three was so well-known that some even took bets on which of the two boys Anri would end up with.

Mikado Ryuugamine was a reserved, proper boy. His hair was as black as it was when he was born, he didn’t have any piercings or accessories, and he dutifully wore his school uniform on a campus where that was not required.

In stark contrast, Masaomi Kida’s hair was dyed an eye-catching brown color, his ears had multiple piercings, and at the end of the sleeve of his own personal jacket glinted a silver bracelet and a ring.

Between the two boys, the girl seemed closer to Mikado in personality. She

was like an even more boring version of him. The glasses gave her the image of a meek librarian or an honor student.

It didn't seem like the three shared anything in common, but the smiles on their faces told any observer that they were close friends, and indeed, this was the case.

"All right! Let's all go pick up some chicks, so we can compare Anri's cute sexiness to theirs and prove her superiority!"

"What kind of nonsense is that?!"

"Uh...p-pick them up...?"

"Don't worry, Anri. Your presence will lure them in: 'Oh, there's a girl with them, so this has to be safe!' You won't need to do a thing."

The trio created a warm friendliness that shielded them from the chilly breeze. The other groups of students milling around were invested in similar conversations, which gave the school a different atmosphere from the rest of the city surrounding it.

Just as they were about to pass through the school gate, Masaomi came to a sudden stop and turned back wistfully to the building.

"So, just one week left on the path of our first year of school. It all happened so fast."

"Yeah, it sure did."

"It was very brief."

Mikado and Anri found it surprising that Masaomi would act so sentimental. They joined him in looking back at the school, reflecting in their own way—except that Mikado quickly looked sideways at Anri's meaningful expression, blushing slightly.

She looked back toward him suddenly. He hastily snapped his eyes to the school building, but it felt like their gazes had met for an instant. He didn't feel like making an excuse like, "I was looking at *you*"—that was more up Masaomi's alley—so he tried to hide the awkwardness by changing the subject instead.

"S-speaking of which...Mr. Nasujima sure quit school all of a sudden, didn't

he?”

“ ...”

Anri’s face looked pensive for a moment. But Mikado didn’t notice; he continued to chatter on about the relatively unfamiliar teacher. “I wonder why? It’s such a random time to leave. He could have just waited another week and made it a clean break at the end of the year.”

It was not Anri, but Masaomi, who responded, “Who knows? Maybe he got busted for leaking the finals questions to me. But if so, wouldn’t I have gotten called in and punished, too?”

“Did I just hear you let slip what I think you did?”

“It wasn’t a slip at all. I summoned considerable courage in coming clean and admitting my crimes to you. Praise me! The same way you’d praise the honesty of the biographer who admitted the story about George Washington chopping down the cherry tree was a total fabrication!”

“I don’t give a crap about the honesty of someone who has to twist logic in knots to make his point.”

As they bickered like usual, Anri’s conflicted expression gradually softened. Mikado noticed her slight grin and shyly switched to a new topic.

“Speaking of people who vanished...the same goes for the slasher.”

Anri’s smile vanished as well. Mikado suddenly realized his mistake and hastily bowed his head.

“S-sorry, Sonohara. I didn’t mean to make you remember...”

“Huh? No! I’m fine. I’m sorry. It’s nothing, really,” she apologized back for no real reason, startled by his sudden concession.

Anri had been admitted to the hospital after she was attacked by the slasher on that infamous night a few weeks back. Mikado and Masaomi were more concerned for her sake than anyone. Then again, she didn’t really have any other friends, and without a family, the only other people than these two who visited her in the hospital were her teacher Kitagoma and her old friend Mika.

The speed of her recovery surprised everyone, and after a few days and tests—

with only Mikado and Masaomi visiting her on each of those days—she was cleared to leave. Once out, they treated her like nothing had ever happened.

Then again, Masaomi's visits had been very brief, and he usually had some parting comment like, "RN? Caretaker? No, there's no better term for an angel in white than *nurse*."

In personality, Mikado and Masaomi were just as different as their appearances suggested. Masaomi publicly professed his attraction to Anri but said the same thing about other girls equally. Meanwhile, Mikado had never officially announced his fondness for her. He was shy enough that he seemed to be satisfied just hanging out as a threesome at Masaomi's insistence.

Meanwhile, Anri did not wish to destroy that relationship, and she had no score to settle with the boys on that matter. The other girls at the school understood her personality and therefore didn't spread false rumors about how she was playing the both of them.

Even the group of bullies who usually harassed her had been strangely well behaved since their leader found herself one of the slasher's victims. Mikado heard a number of such rumors regarding their little trio.

Now that he no longer felt uncomfortable with his standing, he was ready to head out into the city with Masaomi on his frivolous plan, grumbling all the while.

The sudden vibration of a phone put an end to that brief moment of peace.

Masaomi pulled his phone out of his pants pocket and answered it at once. "Hello? It's me..." His face hardened for an instant. He murmured a few words back, then stashed the phone away and turned to them, bowing with a hand held vertically in front of his face.

"Sorry. An old friend wants to meet up all of a sudden."

"Oh, really?"

"If you want to blame anyone, blame my friend all you want. Blaming is free, and it's no skin off my back: two birds with one stone!"

Mikado shrugged off this sudden change of plans like it was just business as

usual. “If it means we don’t have to pick up girls, I’m more inclined to thank your friend instead.”

“Nah, save the thanks for me.”

“You’re such a tyrant.”

“Tyrants make their way into the history books a lot easier than a nice old king. See ya tomorrow!” Masaomi called out, a poor excuse for an excuse, and trotted out of the gate.

Mikado watched his friend grow smaller and smaller in the distance. He turned to Anri with a wry, exasperated grin.

“We could have at least gone with him partway. What’s the rush about?”

“Dunno...”

“What about you, Sonohara? Are you going home now?”

“I suppose... I’ve got something to take care of, too,” Anri said, grinning. She headed for the gate to prod Mikado onward.

“I see... Yeah, okay. It’s funny... The sunset was so pretty today, but there are scary-looking clouds overhead. There could be some showers soon. Stay dry, okay?”

“Ah, okay... Thank you for your concern.”

That doesn’t just mean she wants to stay away from me, does it?

“They say the day after a pretty sunset is always clear, but I don’t know about the night in between.”

“Good point...”

Anri’s typical reaction stung Mikado a bit. He was concerned at the fact that as soon as Masaomi left, she found she had “something to take care of.”

If possible, he hoped to visit a café with her—but it was difficult to bring himself to ask that now, certainly not after she claimed she had business of her own.

Mikado was curious about the nature of her errand, but he never managed to ask. They talked about their usual harmless topics on the way back home.

He never once stopped to think about the nature of Masaomi's errand, however.



One hour later, Sunshine, Sixtieth Floor Street, Ikebukuro

"Hey, Shizuo."

"What is it, Tom?"

Two men carefully wound through the crowd that was largely made up of Raira students. The one with glasses and dreads spoke to the other man.

"I'm gettin' hungry. Time to grab a bite."

"Good idea. I'm not feeling picky," the young man in the bartender outfit replied quietly.

"Hey, Shizuo...why the bartender getup?"

"I had a part-time job bartending once, and my little brother wanted to make sure I didn't get fired this time, so he ordered me twenty of the same outfit. These clothes are all over my house."

"...Your brother's pretty damn generous."

"If there's one thing he's got a lot of, it's money."

The man envisioned the face of his brother and sighed. This was Shizuo Heiwajima, widely seen as the most dangerous man in the streets of Ikebukuro. At his side was his work superior, Tom Tanaka.

The two worked together as debt collectors for a *telekura*—a phone-based dating service. As their job was to collect money from folks who tried to run out on their debts, it involved danger in a variety of ways.

"Money, huh? Hey, wasn't there an armed robbery around here just a little while ago? I bet it was just a model gun made to look real. Then again, if you tinker with them enough, even a model gun can be deadly."

"Scary stuff."

"Says you," snorted Tom, but his laugh was not directed at Shizuo. He didn't want the trouble of pissing the other fellow off over something as harmless as

this.

They had finished their daytime collecting, and next they would be after those customers who only showed up at night. There was plenty of time until then, so they decided to look for a place to eat, when...

“Hello, Shizoo-oh. Tom. Nice to see yoo.”

Two black hands grabbed their shoulders, accompanied by cartoonishly accented Japanese.

The men spun around and saw an enormous black man standing nearly seven feet tall.

There were a surprising number of black street solicitors in Ikebukuro, most of them working for thrift shops and clubs. But what set this man apart was the outfit—a blue-and-white apron with RUSSIA SUSHI stitched on the breast.

“Your tummy growl, just now. Yes? I hear it. Good ears, me. You eat. Eat sushi. Even Satan in hell like sushi.”

“...”

Tom smiled uncomfortably at the man’s Japanese, which was broken in a variety of ways. He looked over at Shizuo.

Shizuo was staring impassively back at the black man. His state of mind was unreadable.

But it was clear that at the very least, he was not in a good mood.

“Sorry, Simon. I’m not flush with cash today...”

“Oh. I make cheap. No worry, half-price sale.”

“What...really?”

For a second, the two men were seriously tempted. That was a deal too good to pass up.

“Other half goes on tab. You pay other half with interest next time.”

Something in Shizuo’s neck made a sharp crackling noise. “Listen, Simon... You have any idea what the hell you’re saying to me?”

Tom noted the pulsing in Shizuo's temples and took a position a good six feet away. Despite the obvious warning signs, the man named Simon continued with an innocent smile.

"Rip-off is wisdom of Japan. Grandma's best advice, yes? Izaya tell me long time ago."

"—!"

The word *Izaya* was the switch. Shizuo unleashed a devastating attack from point-blank range.

The fist seemed to slice directly through the air itself, only to be enveloped in Simon's massive palm like it was made of paper. Though this might have given the impression that the blow was light and harmless, Simon's body slid backward about three feet the instant it stopped the punch.

A savvy viewer might believe that Simon slid backward himself to soften the impact, but no, it was at least 270 pounds of pressure from the fist alone that pushed him.

Shizuo took a step forward to close the gap and unleashed more punches. Simon rotated his hands back and forth to absorb the blows, a troubled smile on his face as he tried to calm the younger man.

"Shizoo-oh angry. Make stomach emptily empty. Not enough calcium. Oh, Shizuo. Hands are sushi chef's life. Punching not good."

"Only because! You're using them! To stop my blows!"

The words only served to make Shizuo angrier, the force and speed of his punches rising.

"Oh, scary, scary."

At the limit of what his hands could absorb, Simon sidestepped to evade the body blow this time. In the space behind him was a red postal box sticking out of the concrete.

The hard metal object wavered in a way it was not meant to move, with the *pop* of a balloon exploding.

The onlookers around them assumed that it was the sound of Shizuo's fist

cracking to pieces. Some of them shrieked and turned away.

But Shizuo only moved on to his next attack, unaffected. He thrust a leaping knee in Simon's direction.

"Who said you could dodge? You have any idea how much a postal box costs? Huh?!"

Tom watched Shizuo run off after Simon, then cast a glance at the side of the box. The red metal was cracked around a dent about four inches deep, like a cannonball had struck the box directly.

The passersby noticed the dent as well and glanced back and forth between Shizuo and the postal box in disbelief.

Tom scanned the crowd quickly to ensure there were no cops present. He mumbled, "Uh-oh. What if they come after us and demand repair costs? How much does a postal box cost anyway? And how can Simon take punches like this one and laugh them off...?"

He continued to examine the surrounding crowd—then realized that he wasn't seeing any of the people with the yellow scraps today.

"Hmm...? What's this? You'd think the kids in the yellow scarves would be all over this."

If they weren't around at this time of day, there had to be a gathering somewhere. Tom looked up at the darkening sky and noticed the black, heavy clouds massing overhead. The sunset light against their underbellies shone down on Ikebukuro, eerily red.

He gazed at the sky for several moments until he realized that Shizuo and Simon were steadily proceeding farther into an alley. He started walking in their direction, sighing.

Thinking of their night shift collecting debts, he mumbled dejectedly.

"Crap... Does this mean rain?"



Several hours later, abandoned factory, Tokyo

In a location slightly removed from Ikebukuro, there was a whole row of

factories, one of which looked especially run-down and desolate.

It was likely used to produce some kind of steel at one point, but aside from a few clearly useless artifacts remaining behind, all of the operating equipment had been taken out, leaving it barren.

Despite its reasonably close proximity to the downtown parts of the city, the surroundings were truly desolate. Hardly anyone could be seen walking the streets around the factory.

It had clearly been several years since the building had been abandoned, its gray walls rusting out in spots. The land wasn't even valuable enough to have the deed recycled for another purpose—but that did not mean it was not being used.

To make up for the emptiness outside, the interior of the factory was packed with people.

It was not a large variety—most within the building were of a young age. In fact, the sea of faces could be described as “boys,” with some as young as middle school or even elementary age.

But that did not mean the factory was buzzing with youthful energy. The boys were even quieter and better behaved than how they must have acted while in class at school.

Every single one of the boys had some kind of yellow cloth displayed on his body, whether bandanna, scarf, or boxer's bandages wrapped around the hands. When combined with the overwhelming number present, it produced a sea of yellow.

“So...who got hit?” asked a boy leaning against a drum can in the midst of the group of dozens.

A boy near him mumbled in a sluggish voice devoid of emotion. “It was Mr. Horada.”

“Don't recognize that name. Who's Horada? I would remember an odd name like that...and what do you mean, 'Mister'?”

“Uh...just that he was an alum of Higa and his friends' high school...,” the boy

mumbled again, growing quieter as the sentence went on.

The boy in the middle asked, “Higa... Oh, one of the people who joined while I was away from the group? But when you say ‘alum,’ does that mean he’s over twenty now?”

“Yeah...I think he’s right about there.”

“Hmm.”

The boy went silent for a while. Eventually he craned his head, cracking his neck, and hopped down off the drum canister.

“Well, it’s fine. Whatever happened in the organization while I was gone was your decision, and I’m not gonna fuss over it.”

“...’Kay.”

“I just want you to be careful. If the older folks bring in even older people, and it eventually reached the point that so-and-so from the so-and-so syndicate comes knocking on the door...that’s when this whole thing is finished.”

The boy’s smile was more wry and self-mocking than one who was simply lecturing his fellows would wear. The gathering of youths were all the type to despise that sort of patronization, but they heard him out without a single complaint.

“We’re kids. No matter how many of us there are, we can’t overcome real adults. We’re not smart enough about the world. They’ll use us to their ends, and then it’s over.”

He paused for a breath and glanced sideways balefully, murmuring, “The same way that Izaya Orihara used me.”

“That wasn’t your fault, Shogun...”

“C’mon, how many times do I have to tell you?” he said exasperatedly, correcting their theatrical title for him. “I’m not your shogun, I’m Masaomi Kida.”

And the boy thought about his past.

The inescapable past that had created the Masaomi Kida of today.



The Yellow Scarves.

When did the color gang based around a *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* motif get started? Even Masaomi couldn't remember.

There was no real necessity behind the creation of the gang.

Even the choice of yellow for the gang's color was based on nothing more than a TV show that was popular at the time. That's all that Masaomi recalled of the decision, and even after this much time, he had almost no sentiment or attachment to the color at all.

Because the manga Masaomi was into at the time was based in the *Three Kingdoms* setting and they knew the color would be yellow, it was inevitable that the name of the gang ended up being Yellow Scarves.

That was the extent of the rationale behind the name and color.

The only important question was why they got together.

But even that genesis was nothing more than a fragment of memory from Masaomi's distant past.

Masaomi was still in elementary school when he left his hometown and came to Ikebukuro.

It was a massive culture shock to move to such a wildly different place from the familiar countryside he knew.

He had to tell someone about this—so he chose to boast about the big city to his old friend, Mikado Ryuugamine.

It wasn't because he was particularly close with Mikado, but just because he was the only one who had Internet access at his house. Back in the early days of the Internet, chat partners were a valuable commodity. Masaomi regaled him with tales of the things that happened in Ikebukuro.

His friend showed no lack of curiosity over the adventurous stories of Tokyo. Mikado was the perfect audience for Masaomi.

When Masaomi reached middle school and his innate feistiness grew more pronounced, he would brag to Mikado about the fights he'd seen and

participated in during his urban stay.

“Just don’t overdo it,” Mikado would warn, but his eyes sparkled in fascination at Masaomi’s exploits, and he still demanded to hear all about them.

Eventually, Masaomi found his way deeper and deeper.

Deeper into the heart of Ikebukuro.

Even deeper.

When he first started talking about his fights, there was no feeling of guilt. He believed that they were all fights someone else picked with him, and he hadn’t hurt his opponents too much.

But it all started going south when he saw a classmate being harassed in town and took on the fight for him.

Soon people began to gather around him. His classmates’ friends called more friends into the circle, causing it to grow.

At times, some people offered to handle the fights for him, and Masaomi’s group began to make a name for itself within their public middle school. Of course, it was a school without many true delinquents, and they weren’t in a position to make trouble with any nearby schools.

But that only meant there were no brakes to stop them.

Slowly, so slowly, the group grew in size.

In his youth, Masaomi did not understand what this meant yet. There was merely a vague sense of anxiety in the back of his mind.

And then, around the time their group took on the name of Yellow Scarves...

...Masaomi stopped telling Mikado about it.

Instead, he told his old friend about things in town like usual. He just didn’t include any details about his odd companions.

During the days, he would hang out with his Yellow Scarves as always. It wasn’t awkward for him. In fact, he enjoyed the feeling of lording it over his little group.

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that it only served to further distance the old memories of his countryside home.

He cared about his friends in his new environment. But he felt that there was a fundamental distinction between them.

If he bragged about his gang leadership to Mikado, that would somehow end his connection to home for good, he felt.

Should he stay true to his old self? Or embrace his new role as leader of the Yellow Scarves?

It was a silly and unnecessary choice, but it tormented him all the same.

His friends here were only connected to him as long as he was fighting. He was worried that they might leave him as soon as he slipped up and made a mistake.

He wanted someone.

Someone to affirm his actions and support him.

Someone who, like Mikado from his hometown, set him at ease and grounded him so that he could be at home in Ikebukuro.

It was during this period of growing unease that she showed up out of the blue.

“That’s a cool yellow scarf. It looks nice on you.”

She was referring to the trademark of the Yellow Scarves tied around his arm.

The girls showed little fear or concern about Masaomi. It was what one might call a “reverse pickup,” where a group of young women around their age reached out to contact Masaomi’s little group hanging out at the train station.

Masaomi was fully comfortable with his life in the big city right around the time that the Yellow Scarves numbered about thirty in total. As their numbers grew, Masaomi got tired of the fighting, and the Yellow Scarves as a whole turned easygoing and relaxed. There were very few squabbles with other gangs at that point.

He tried picking up girls when he was on his own, but he rarely succeeded, and even when he did, the relationship was lazy and brief. That’s how he had always related to women, even before coming to Ikebukuro.

Mikado always marveled at these exploits, claiming that he was “still just in

middle school!” But Masaomi had been going out with girls since his elementary years, so he usually turned the tables and teased Mikado for being too shy instead.

So when this moment came, Masaomi didn’t give it any more thought than *Hey, I got hit on by some girls, and they’re pretty hot, too. Lucky me, I’m not doing anything right now.*

“You’re called the Yellow Scarves. Isn’t that right?” one of the girls asked boldly. Masaomi felt his excitement cool off.

Oh. She’s not interested in me personally, just the group. Then again, we must be getting famous if even normal girls like her are aware of us.

He was ready to put on a different face, to express more acutely his individual nature as Masaomi Kida, but one of the girls preempted him with a gentle smile.

“You’re way cooler in person than the rumors suggest, Masaomi Kida.”

“Huh?” he gaped stupidly.

How did she know his name? It was the girl in the center of the opposing group. She had a bright smile and lightly dyed a lock of her boyish short hair, a look that made her rather visually similar to him. He blinked in surprise.

“What? How do you know my name? Are you psychic? Like Psychic Itou? If you keep reading people’s minds, I’m gonna have to stuff you into a bag and take you home with me!” he teased, referencing a popular TV comedian to hide his consternation about being recognized.

Masaomi’s fellow Yellow Scarves looked among themselves, unsure of how they should react, while the girls giggled at Masaomi’s joke. The one in the center gleefully responded, “Oh my God, you’re being so weird! You’re so funny, Kida!”

After a bout of laughter, she gently shook her head. “But I’m not a psychic. The real psychic is someone else.”

“Oh? Who’s that? Does one of these girls around here speak to ghosts?” Masaomi asked, looking at the others with a gentle smile of his own. Some of the girls were already speaking to other members of the Yellow Scarves, and only the

three clustered around the short-haired girl were facing him directly.

“Let me guess, she asked the ghosts of my ancestors just what a cool guy I am, right? Or is it one of the sort that hangs out behind my back? Or a paralysis ghost, or a floating ghost, or what have you. Whatever kind of ghost it is, I’m sure it’ll be reborn under the most awesome conditions in the future. Maybe as the child of you and me?” he joked bawdily, testing her reaction. Though her hair was dyed, she and the other girls seemed fairly straightforward, not trashy. He was testing their reactions to see if they would get along with his style.

“Now you’re just being silly. Let me guess, do you already have a name picked out?”

“Well, we’d need to take a look at the characters in the parents’ names, right? So what’s your name?”

The girl played along well, not missing a beat.

“Saki Mikajima. Mikajima is spelled with *three*, a small *ke*, and *island*. And Saki is a shortened form of the *Stewartia* tree.”

“*Stewartia*? So in flower language, your name means like, ‘Seize your chance before it wilts away’?”

“Oh, wow! You know what it is? I figured you would ask, ‘What’s that?’” she said, surprised.

Masaomi grinned, feeling his engine kicking in. “Sure, I know everything. I just ask the ghost hanging out over my back.” He wasn’t sure if that one was a little too corny.

Saki said, “Exactly.”

“Huh?”

“The person standing behind you is kind of psychic, in a way. He’s very special. He knows everything.”

“Huh?”

Before Masaomi could turn around in shock, a hand fell on his shoulder.

“Whah?”

Masaomi spun on his heels and saw an unfamiliar man standing there.

“Hi, nice to meet you. It’s, um...Masaomi Kida, right?” the man said, smiling amiably.

When he looked at the man’s face, a single emotion rose in Masaomi’s chest: vague anxiety. The same sensation he’d felt when people started to rally around him.

Masaomi felt his entire body wrapped in an odd prickling alienation that he couldn’t quite describe.

“...And you are?” he asked suspiciously.

The older man held out his hand and beamed. “I’m Izaya Orihara. Information is my business.”

“Nice to meet you.”



The boy recalled the impishly innocent yet cunning and crafty smile of Izaya and clicked his tongue in irritation. “There, see? I just remembered some shit I didn’t want to think about. Enough of the depressing talk!”

He crossed his legs in front of him and changed the topic. “Oh, right, this is depressing, too. So what was the deal? Who beat up this Horada guy last night?”

“I told you... Um, the Black Rider. I mean, technically it was the guy the rider was with who did Mr. Horada.”

“...Wasn’t Higa telling me the exact same story a while back? Right around the time I returned... It was Shizuo, wasn’t it? They didn’t go back for a rematch with him, did they? If so, I don’t have a lot of sympathy. In fact, if that was the case, I’d tell them to get the hell away.”

His tone was light and jokey, but there was a sheen of sweat on his expression. It was the face of someone who knew the terror that this man named Shizuo commanded.

One of the boy’s companions mumbled, “Er, well... Higa’s group is in a panic, too. They got whacked by some freak wearing a white gas mask. Said their limbs got tied down by...shadows or some weird shit like that.”

“...What is that, some ninjutsu arts or something?”

“I have no idea. Anyway, the Black Rider gave the gas mask dude a ride, and they just took off...”

With that rather unhelpful report, Masaomi was back to a serious expression again. “I wonder what’s up with that Black Rider.”

Anyone who lived in Ikebukuro knew the urban legend of the Black Rider. When his old friend moved to Tokyo, Masaomi had bragged about the rider—but in truth, he didn’t know the identity or intentions of the strange being.

“All I’ve heard is that he’s supposed to be a member of the Dollars.”

Dollars.

The expressions on those in yellow around him slowly began to evolve.

Many of them believed that the slashing incidents were the work of the Dollars, and an equal number of them found the concept of a color gang without a color to be eerie and unsettling.

But for whatever reason, all of the Yellow Scarves who were actually hurt in the attacks only claimed that they “didn’t remember” what happened. For the Yellow Scarves, the police, and the media, the full picture of the slasher was still unclear.

Now that the slasher was in hiding, the news had moved on to newer topics, and the incident was beginning to fade from the public’s mind. But for those who had felt the madness of that incident at close range, those who knew some of the victims, the truth of the matter was carved into them just as deeply as those wounds the victims had suffered.

“I have no intention of forgiving whoever cut down my people,” Masaomi announced, his foot perched boldly up on top of a drum canister. He got down and strode through the meaningful glances of the crowd toward the exit, mumbling to himself.

It was a sentiment he had uttered over and over to himself since he had first returned to this place several days ago. As though he was trying to convince himself of something.

“Shit... How dare you suck me back in...”

“Who’s there?!” echoed a sudden shout of anger off the factory walls.

It could have been the bellow of the landowner come to see what was happening—but the shout came from the members of the group standing watch outside.

“What’s up?” Masaomi asked promptly and received an answer from one of the guards just as promptly.

“They said some girl was trying to spy on us... They’re chasing her now.”

“Girl?”

It was probably just some bystander passing by who peered in out of curiosity from all the commotion inside, Masaomi thought. But then he remembered that several members were guarding each entrance to the property, so that seemed unlikely.

“I want to talk to her. Catch her, make it quiet.”

The factory was not particularly large, but there was scrap material and junked vehicles piled up outside the structure, which might make catching her difficult if she hid among the piles.

Masaomi headed outside to assist in the search, heard the bustle of his fellow members following behind him, and held up a hand. “We don’t need a big group. Just ten will do.”

If the entire gang ran around the property, they would surely draw notice. The last thing a big group like theirs needed was the loss of one of the few places they could meet in private because someone reported them to the police.

Masaomi knew that the authorities had stepped up their crackdown on the color gangs in recent years. He wanted to protect their space at all costs. They had been hanging here since the days when he was their full-time leader. Something about the space, something distinct from say, a nightclub, reminded him of the vibes of his hometown. He didn’t want to lose the space if he could help it.

Not that it’s up to me. I don’t own the building, Masaomi thought wryly to

himself. *It's funny...after I already gave up the place once.*

The sun was already down, and without many streetlights in the vicinity, the factory grounds were surprisingly dark. It seemed to Masaomi that she could easily get away under these circumstances. He tried to imagine the intruder.

They said it was a woman—probably a curious tabloid writer. If she was an official of some kind, she would have just marched right through the entrance.

It could be someone from an opposing color gang, but there were few of those around these days, and Masaomi's team did not beef with any of them.

Except for the Dollars.

The Dollars were a unique organization that expanded its reach through the Internet. Masaomi himself had registered on their site for kicks ages ago.

About a year ago, he heard that they were having their first real-life meeting. Masaomi did not attend. He assumed that by gathering as a group and using that power, they would be no different from the Yellow Scarves.

Then again, if I had really dug deep into the Dollars and become an officer... maybe I could have prevented this from happening.

It was with that thought in mind that Masaomi started walking the opposite direction as the one the lookouts had run. The lot was small enough that it would be faster to circle around from the other side.

Suddenly, he got a subtle sensation of something moving. Masaomi was once again plunged into a vague sense of unease.

No, not quite.

The unease...has always been there.

Masaomi quickened his pace, trying to process the swirling, bubbling emotions within him.

The first time I felt it was when people started to gather around me, when all I did was fight.

He took step after step through the darkness, classifying the emotion that had plagued him from past to present. The usual smirking grin on Masaomi's face

was completely gone. Only the unease grew.

The vague unease I'd forgotten came back to my mind when I first met Saki.

The gloom of the sky covered his heart like a suffocating blanket, fanning the flames of his smoldering concerns.

And when I met Izaya after that, the vagueness of that unease turned into rock-hard anxiety.

The farther he got from the entrance to the building, the thicker the darkness became, until he could no longer see his feet.

But Saki...helped me forget that dread.

As his pace increased, Masaomi's state of mind gradually shook more and more violently.

And when the accident happened...I broke away from Saki...and left the Yellow Scarves...

The past flashed before his eyes. His pulse quickened by the moment.

That should have been the end of the dread.

Thump, thump. His heart thudded.

I can't forgive...whoever attacked Anri and the guys who used to be my friends...

His feet hit the ground faster and faster, matching that rhythm.

That's why I came back. It's the only reason.

He suddenly realized that large raindrops were falling.

So...why is it happening now?

As the rhythm of the rain picked up to join him, it churned up Masaomi's unease into a thicker froth.

Why is the anxiety rushing back stronger than it ever did before?

He felt as though he was in reach of the nature of that unease.

Masaomi realized that he was in a full sprint around the back of the factory.



Run.

Run, run, run.

Just run.

Not to a specific destination, but to escape from the chasing shadows.

Spurring legs onward in danger of cramps—forward, ever forward.

She only wanted to know.

The truth.

The truth of a matter that involved her.

The cost of that truth was the scampering of a mouse on the run from a cat.

In the cramped factory lot, there were only so many places to hide.

She slid into the shadow of a pile of scrap material, shrank to lower her profile.

The escapee judged that hiding would be a more effective option than running like mad.

She couldn't feel anything.

The only sensation was the mental shock of what she had just seen.

She spoke, only for the purpose of calming her frayed nerves.

“Why...?”

She knew that no one could answer her.

“Why...why was Kida...in a place like that...?”

The girl in glasses asked the void.

The sky visible between the piles of junk was covered in dark clouds, silently dispersing her query to nothingness.

By way of answer, a cold droplet hit her cheek.

As she watched, rain began to fall around her.

A curtain of water and sound, covering everything beneath it.

Fshh, fshh, fshh, fshh.

Anri Sonohara's heart calmed itself into that wave of radio static.

Fshh, fshh, fshh, fshh.



IS
THERE
A
PROBLEM?

A black rectangular box with a white border. Inside, the text "IS THERE A PROBLEM?" is written in a bold, sans-serif font, arranged in four lines.

Chapter 4: Is There a Problem?

Apartment building, near Kawagoe Highway, Ikebukuro

It had been one very tumultuous day since Shingen Kishitani came to stay in Shinra's apartment.

There was no chance to speak with him on the previous night, as Shingen had immediately collapsed onto the sofa and began snoring tremendously.

When Shinra came back from the convenience store, he found Celty silently absorbed in her online chat and his father sprawled out on the sofa, gas mask still in place.

He sighed in a rare indication of lament at the bizarre, otherworldly sight.

When his exceedingly self-absorbed father finally woke twenty hours later, he nimbly zipped into the bathroom with an agility that showed no sign of headache after oversleeping for so long. One hour after that...

"Ahh, I feel much better after that shower. Gotta love new apartment buildings. The water temperature adjustments are very smooth and pleasant," Shingen mumbled to himself as he emerged from the bathroom, white gas mask still in place.

He took a look around the apartment, then finally noticed the figures of Celty and Shinra at the dining table, wirelessly playing handheld games.

"By the way, thanks for coming to pick me up yesterday, Celty. Just put the cost for ferrying me on Shinra's *tab* over there. Hmm? Oh, Shinra, you're here. Hi. Also, I'm here."

Shingen was wearing his white coat over his underwear like a bathrobe. Celty flopped over the table, unable to even summon the energy to poke fun at his outfit. Shinra took his father to task in her place.

“I see you haven’t changed a bit, Dad. If you want to feel fully refreshed, you should probably take the mask off.”

“Isn’t it normal to make sure that nothing filthy enters the body? This is the Tokyo Desert, an accumulation of malice like a sandstorm. A gritty mass of teeming humanity. Get it, because sand is grit—”

“If you have to explain the wordplay, it’s not a very good joke.”

“Plus, I don’t think complaining about sand is very smart, Dad. Desert sands that get carried elsewhere can actually bring nutrients to the soil.”

Shingen shook his head, unperturbed by Celty and Shinra’s cold responses. “You don’t understand... The world is full of unclean ruffians of the sort we saw yesterday. Didn’t they just say there was an armed robbery recently? Assuming all people are like them, this lowers the risk of them being able to identify my face. Long live the gas mask! I figured you would appreciate my consideration in painting the mask white so that you could identify me at a distance.”

“Who else even wears a gas mask? Does this look like a chemical weapons war zone to you? In fact...isn’t it because of that stupid outfit that you got singled out for harassment?”

“You may be right... But who were they, anyway? They wore yellow bandannas... Mimics of some American street gangs, perhaps?” Shingen muttered, rubbing his side as he recalled the boys who had harassed him the previous night.

Shinra sipped his coffee and answered, “Oh, the Yellow Scarves? They started up just around the time you left for the United States. They don’t mess around with thieving or stickups or anything like that, though. They got into a tussle with another team a while back and supposedly settled down, but it seems they’re on the rise again, for some reason or another.”

“I see. Well, it’s normal for gangs in America to kill one another over territory squabbles. In that sense, at least Japan is peaceful—not that it changes the fact that I was mercilessly and unfairly attacked. Let them squabble with another gang, and the twain can fall to ruin and melt into the sewers together!” Shingen ranted grandiosely.

“That’s absolutely insane,” Celty typed in disgust—then fell into a gloomy mood when she remembered what had come up in chat yesterday.

The Yellow Scarves and Dollars were already in a hostile mood, and this had most certainly turned the Yellow Scarves into an enemy. The problem was that this incident had nothing to do with either the Dollars or the slasher. They were the ones who had cast the first stone, so they couldn’t make such a big deal about the affair, Celty thought. But the anxiety was still there.

As one of the few people who knew the identity of the slasher, Celty felt she had some responsibility to mediate and clear up the misunderstanding—but it was difficult to turn that thought into action, knowing Anri’s state of mind. On top of that, it was a story that beggared belief, so even if she was able to get through to them, it wasn’t likely to satisfy the Yellow Scarves and Dollars entirely.

Both the Dollars and the slasher were important to her. She wanted to do something to help, but if anyone was going to shoulder the most pain, it would end up being the Yellow Scarves, to whom she had no connection, and such a self-serving outcome would only leave her with a bad aftertaste. She had no good ideas.

As she sat there, idly tapping the table with her fingers, Shingen asked curiously, “Ah, Celty. You seem to be irritated about something. Empty stomach? That’s no good. A courier needs to be broad and welcoming in spirit at all times. I noticed you furiously smacking away at that cheap PDA yesterday... Trouble with the pocketbook?”

Celty considered what sort of withering retort he deserved, but fortunately, a narrow-eyed Shinra spoke for her.

“If that’s your conclusion, maybe you should pay up what you owe her for the trip.”

“I told you, that goes on your tab...”

“Whatever Celty makes goes right into our family fund. It’s like you’re spending with one hand to pay the other. Just ante up.”

“Hmm. In that case, I’ll have to wriggle out of it like usual.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a blade tangled around Shingen's neck. It took less than a second for the wave of black particles extending from Celty's hand to reach him. The pointed shadow was stopped less than an inch from piercing his carotid artery, freezing him entirely. As he waited, she typed into her PDA and showed him the message.

"Oh? Wriggle out of what?"

"...I see your skill has grown since I saw you before. You can do this with your shadow now? This was all just a test, you see. I'm afraid you've fallen just short of a passing grade, but if you release me this instant, I might see fit to bump your score to— Ow-ow-ow-ow, you're stabbing me, you're stabbing me! The tip of your shadow is stabbing me, Celty! Curses! How dare you destroy my skin membrane, you creature of unidentified matter! Oh, I'd study you so hard if you weren't outside my field of experti— Ow, ow, ow-ow-ow-ow!"

Shingen's expression was hidden behind the mask, but his desperation was clear from the way his limbs flopped around, trying to pry the shadow away from his neck. Once he realized that this would get him nowhere, he abandoned all pride and begged his son for help.

"Shinra, your flesh and blood is in mortal peril. You see, I am testing you and thus acting out my own so-called peril...but if I might be perfectly honest, I am in all actuality truly in danger! Gosh, I don't know how to say this... You're my son. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course I get it," Shinra said flatly. He strode over to Shingen, then pulled the wallet out of his helpless father's coat and tossed it to Celty.

"Wha—!" Shingen yelped, stunned. Celty pulled a pair of ten thousand-yen bills out and chucked the wallet back at Shingen. The shadowy restraints vanished, the black thorns dispersing cleanly into the apartment air.

"Thanks for your business."

"...Ripped off to the tune of twenty thousand yen, how about that? And on top of that, I finally see my son's true nature. Well, you're not getting any inheritance."

"I don't want any, and if I don't mind saying so myself, this seems to be a quite

fitting action for your own son to commit, don't you think?" Shinra quipped.

His father grumbled through the gas mask. "Rrrgh... Taken to the cleaners by a monster..."

"If Celty took me to the cleaners and stole my soul, I'd be a happy man," Shinra retorted.

Celty sat back down shyly and unpaused the video game. But Shingen interrupted by sidling closer to her and noting, "Nicely done, Celty. I can't believe how thoroughly you've tamed my son."

"It's kind of gross to talk about 'taming' your own son like he's a dog."

"Oops! And you're positively brimming with morals and all that. It seems that you've lost your fangs and settled into Japanese customs. But I believe that, if you're going to display proper respect, you ought to start by respecting the father of your landlord," Shingen blathered on.

"It's not an issue of morals," Celty typed irritably. *"I'm saying you shouldn't look down on Shinra."*

"Oh?" Shingen exclaimed as he read both the message on the PDA and the body language she exhibited. "Why, Celty, are you saying...you've fallen in love with my Shinra? I knew that my son was odd, what with his unhealthy fetish for you. Does that mean the feeling is mutual?"

Celty held back on typing further for the moment, unsure of how to respond to that extremely personal question. After a long silence, she looked at Shinra's face and typed two simple words.

"That's right."

The man's son reacted immediately. "Celty! I can't believe you're being so open and honest about our relationship! I'm so, so, so, so, so, so happy! A one-sided pining as lonely as the abalone in the cove has developed into a loving bond, rock hard and unshakable, worthy of being shouted from the rooftops to the ears of unconcerned strangers! I am leaping with exultation at your admission, my dear!"

"Huh? Strangers? But I'm your father..."

Shinra stood up and squirmed with joy, ignoring the grumbling from the gas mask. Celty felt rising embarrassment at her partner's emotional display and extended a blanket of shadow that forced Shinra down into his seat.

“Whaa—?! I think you're beautiful even when you're using your shadow more nimbly than your own limbs, Celty.”

“Just shut up. Don't shout that embarrassing nonsense at the top of your lungs! Also, that simile you used earlier was terrible and made no sense.”

“Why, that just shows you the confusion that ensued at my utter joy to learn of the trueness of your love! And amidst that chaos and confusion, the only certain thing is my devotion to...*mrrgh...mrff!*”

He squirmed as she covered his mouth to stop him from talking. Meanwhile, Shingen sat at the table and imperiously inserted himself into the conversation.

“Hmm... Just a moment. Do you really think I'll allow this kind of relationship?”

“Excuse me?”

“I hate to bring this up, but in human society, you are an unwanted guest—a monster, if you will. Are you aware of that?” he asked, his voice dripping with irony.

Celty did not hesitate in responding, *“Of course.”*

Shingen's eyes went wide behind the gas mask at the forthright confidence of her answer.

“Of...of course?”

“Why? Is there a problem?”

“Well...damn. My plan to take the advantage by bringing up your antisociality has failed. I suppose I only have myself to blame after turning my son into an unlicensed doctor.”

“I don't want to hear a single word from you about antisociality,” she shot back.

Shingen's gas mask turned away from Celty in a huff. He tried a different vector of attack. “Er, okay, well... Is that any way to speak to your lover's father?”

What happened to respect for your elders?”

“I have been alive for at least a century. And that’s only what I remember.”

She still had memory that suggested she had been living for much, much longer than that, but since losing her head, she could only clearly remember the last 120 years. Then again, it was possible that even if she recovered her head, those older memories would remain hazy.

“Grrmm... Very well, I accept your relationship. And in return, you may now refer to me as ‘Father.’ At all times. Knowing your difficulties with your memory, allow me to repeat myself: You will now call me Father.”

“Silence,” she retorted briefly, then gave Shingen a fresh glare. Of course, without any eyeballs to indicate such, Shingen might not even realize she was glaring at him.

Now that I think about it, he might have stolen my head himself. In which case, it would be his fault my memory is poor to begin with.

She just needed some kind of proof. Then she could put him through the wringer. Meanwhile, she decided that she ought to be calm in this situation.

“At any rate, Shinra is not a child.”

“That’s right, Dad. We’re serious about this. I’ve been reborn since Celty came here. I feel permeated with a deep feeling of contentment that never existed before,” argued Shinra, who had finally been freed from the shadow, but his father discarded his opinion.

“But you were just a boy when Celty got here.”

“Age means nothing to true love.”

“Good grief, she really has done a number on you,” Shingen sighed, exasperated at his son’s logic. He rearranged the fit of his gas mask and muttered, “Done a number, huh? Celty, tell me, are you aware of the fairy known as a leanan sídhe?”

“Of course. They’re fairies who travel in search of their destined lover. The man a leanan sídhe ends up with has a shorter life span but receives all kinds of special abilities in return.”

“Aha. Very good,” Shingen said approvingly.

Celty puffed out her chest with pride and boasted, *“Heh, I always get one on my party in my favorite video game series.”*

“Can’t you at least say it’s because they’re fellow fairies? Hell, those are even from Ireland, same as you,” Shinra prodded her, exasperated.

Celty swiveled her PDA screen to show him. *“My home is Ikebukuro. After all... it’s where my family is.”*

“Ohh! That’s the sweetest thing! They say there’s no cure for lovesickness, but your smile can fix all ailments! C’mon, let’s mate like fish—*gwufg!*”

Celty nailed Shinra’s rapidly approaching throat and gave Shingen’s previous question a more considerate answer. *“Back on topic, I do remember meeting a few different fairies back there.”*

She continued typing at the PDA in little bits and pieces, taking the time in between to peruse her uncertain past. *“What about leanan sídhe?”*

“Watching you just now, I had the feeling that perhaps you’re closer to a leanan sídhe than a dullahan.”

“You think I’m going to suck the life out of Shinra?” Celty made a gesture of affront.

Shingen shook his head. “No. As you said, a leanan sídhe is a fairy that travels in search of a man to love. If the man she sets her eye on resists, she becomes a slave who will do anything he says if it will make him love her, but once he accepts her love, it is like a bewitching curse that possesses him until his death.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“A leanan sídhe is invisible to anyone aside from the man of her affections,” Shingen stated flatly, but the eyes visible through the white lenses of the gas mask were sparkling with delight. “Legends say they are extraordinarily beautiful, but only their chosen man can see them. Their beauty is unknown to any but their lover.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“How can you be beautiful if you have no face? Yet my son claims that you are

beautiful with all of his heart. You have some kind of beauty invisible to the rest of us that is only apparent to the man you love.”

It could have been taken as sarcasm, but Celty was not angry. She responded, *“That’s hardly unique to the two of us. There was a boy who claimed to love only my head. Doesn’t this kind of thing happen all the time in normal human romance?”*

“Yes, you’re exactly right. Which means the leanan sídhe is merely a symbol—a standin for a kind of love that is actually more common than we might think. That is why, when I see you, I think that rather than a death-dealing dullahan... you might be more suited to be that other type of fairy.”

“I see...,” Celty typed in understanding, then wondered, *“then what about the part about stealing his life?”*

Shingen’s response to her innocent question came as simply as if it were obvious common sense.

“Same thing. It’s a common phenomenon for human beings to drown in love so heavily that their lives become shorter. Finding love can lead to the blossoming of talent and the shortening of life. It’s two sides of the same coin.”

A moment of silence passed.

Shingen perhaps recognized that something had gone slightly sour in the conversation, so he quietly continued his point from earlier.

“If you follow the local legends, the interpretation of the leanan sídhe changes dramatically depending on who tells the story. Some tales say that she’s an elderly witch who knows nothing of love.”

“I see. You seem to know a lot about fairies.”

“I’ve researched a great many things. It’s only natural.”

“Actually...I do have a very vague memory of leanan sídhe.”

Both Shinra and Shingen turned their heads to her in curiosity. It was quite rare for Celty to speak about her past.

“Ooh? It’s very rare of you to tell a story from before you came to Japan.”

“I guess. I have clear memories of night visions and pixies, things of that nature...but I’ve hardly ever felt the presence of fairies in this country—so the memories are very old.”

Celty’s helmet tilted level, as though she were staring far over the horizon.

“I feel like the leanan sídhe I met were indeed fairly old women. Though I also remember one younger. But there’s nothing more I can do about it until my memory returns entirely. At this point, my memories of Ikebukuro far outweigh those of Ireland. All those old memories do is fade away into nothing.”

Shinra’s hand softly folded over Celty’s, which sat lonely on her knee.

“It’s all right... You can replace the memories you lost with all kinds of new ones from now on. Whether you’re a dullahan or a leanan sídhe or a banshee, I would be honored to have you suck out my life force.”

“Shinra.”

“Let’s start the memories by having a wedding. First step is taking your measurements for your dress, so remove those pesky shadow clothes and —*bwaa-bwee-hee-hee-hee!*”

“Buzz off!”

She pinched Shinra’s cheek hard, but Celty was not truly angry about it. Shinra always made a big show about coming right for her, but she knew that he would not try anything by force and that he wasn’t simply consumed with lust for her.

This was just Shinra’s way of showing his love for her, she knew.

But I really ought to tell him off, anyway.

“Ow, ow, ow! You’re gonna pull my cheek off, Celty. What are you going to do, rip it open and then fix it shut with cheek piercings?” Shinra jabbered, still having fun despite his pain.

His father observed with annoyed resignation. “As they say, water only follows the shape of its vessel... Well, I feel like the reason Shinra turned into such a freak is because he was molded by the shape of your shadow. Actually, now that I think back on it, he was always a freaky kid. Used to laugh with excitement when he dissected anything.”

“Obviously he got that from you!” Celty protested angrily.

Shingen wagged a finger and clicked his tongue at her. “I told you, you are to call me Father. How long ago did I just say that? You really don’t pay attention to the details, Celty—never have. In fact, that’s why you’ve never even suspected that *I stole your head*..... Aaaaaa! Crap!” he shrieked, realizing his mistake. But it was too late.

Celty had just been wishing for more evidence of this crime just minutes earlier, but the anticlimactic admission was so sudden that she didn’t even realize what she’d heard at first. But as the meaning of the words sank into her consciousness, her fingers trembled on the PDA keys.

“Y-youuuuuuu! What did you just say?!”

The twitch in her finger must have caused the *u* key to be pressed down too long.

Shingen’s expression was hidden by the gas mask, but he followed up his mistake with further insult. “Oh, dear. I seem to have admitted a deep, dark secret out loud... But I’m fine! Celty’s so harebrained, she won’t even notice!”

“ ”

The shadows surrounding Celty’s body flickered and danced with rage. She couldn’t even type. The revelation had been so unexpected and abrupt that her anger was not translating into action the way it normally would.

The man in white leaned in to the turn. He bellowed, “Harebrained Celty! Haaarebraaaained Ceeeelty!”

“Shut up! Don’t repeat yourself!” she typed smoothly this time, the explosion of anger focusing the precision of her fingers. Meanwhile, she swung at him with her non-PDA hand, but it only hit empty air.

“Bwa-ha! As if I can’t read a harebrained attack ahead of time,” Shingen crowed, evading Celty’s enraged punch—but not Shinra’s extended foot, flipping him in a half circle to sprawl onto the floor.

“Gak!”

“Dad...I don’t care if you’re my father. I won’t stand for anyone insulting

Celty.”

“No, Shinra, wait. Didn’t you know that harebrained is really more of a form of endearment than an insult— *Ghuff!*”

All the air went out of Shingen’s lungs as Celty stepped down hard on his back. He wasn’t in a position to see her PDA, so she didn’t bother to type anything more. All he needed to pick up was the pure anger emanating from the sole of her foot. It crept up his back closer and closer to his head, the rage taking on a note of murder as it went.

Shingen realized the danger he was in at last and pleaded, “All right! All right, Celty, stop! Let me ex— Let me explain! Not my neck! If you put all of your weight on the nape of my neck, you really will shatter my vertebrae! Stop! Stop! I mean...stop, *please!*”

A few minutes later, Shingen was delivering a grandiose speech to the other two, his latest wave of heavy sweat having completely ruined his recent shower.

“At this point, there’s no use hiding it... Yes, it’s true that the one who stole your head, handed it over to a pharmaceutical company, pretended not to know about it, and made you live in this apartment with Shinra...was me!!”

“How contrite of you.”

At great effort, Shinra had managed to calm Celty down, but the flames of rage within her still licked and flickered at Shingen’s apparent insistence that he bore no sin in the matter.

Although she had essentially decided that she didn’t care about the location of her head anymore, she still couldn’t forgive him for putting her through all of that. Why had he even stolen it in the first place? If there was someone else behind all of this, she wanted to barge into their turf and give them a piece of her mind for an entire day.

Shingen seemed to sense her rage. He said softly, “Very well... I shall tell you why it was necessary to steal your head from you.” He spun around on his heel and strode off for the front door. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

Celty and Shinra turned face and helmet to each other. Shingen was already

slipping his shoes on at the entranceway. They followed after him, watching as he opened the door and headed into the hallway.

Slam!

The front door of the apartment shut abruptly, followed by racing footsteps.

—?!

For an instant, Celty was stunned into inaction by the enormous slam of the door.

Huh? Hmm? What does this mean?

It only resulted in the loss of a few seconds, but that proved to be an irrecoverable delay.

“What? Did Dad just run away?!” Shinra wondered. Understanding came instantly to Celty. She raced to the entrance, flung her own shoes out of shadow and kicking the door open.

All she saw was the plain hallway of the apartment building. On the other side of the hallway was the light of the opposing apartment. She looked left and right and spotted the indicator of the elevator right next to Shinra’s apartment descending toward the ground floor.

That perverted freak. He’s not getting away from me!

Celty eyed the staircase at the far end of the hallway and took off running.

Her running speed was no different from that of a regular human being...

But the way that the shadows writhed and spun around her made her look like a terrifying Grim Reaper.

“...Is she gone?” came a voice, muffled by a gas mask, from behind Shinra’s back as he watched Celty disappear around the corner of the stairs.

“Whoa!!”

Shinra jumped at the sudden voice and spun around to see Shingen’s head poking out of the shadows behind an open door.

“Dad... You made it look like you were running away, and then you hid?”

“Pretty much. I nearly ran into the open door first,” Shingen said proudly, glancing in the direction that Celty had run while rearranging the fit of his gas mask. “But my plan to just hit the elevator button and hide worked out. I won through sheer luck—the elevator just happened to be stopped on this floor.”

“I can’t believe this,” Shinra muttered in exasperation.

Shingen brushed dust off of his white lab coat. “Hmm. As long as I keep the front of the coat buttoned, I suppose no one will notice I’m just wearing long underwear underneath... Anyway, I’m going to slip away quietly for now. I’ll leave my luggage with you and come back to get it when Celty’s not around.”

“...I’m surprised you think I’m going to let you do any of that.”

“You don’t want her to become a murderer, do you?”

“Celty’s not that short-tempered.”

Shinra’s father grinned beneath his gas mask and stealthily strode out into the hallway. “Ah yes. I have a feeling that a guest will be coming for me, so when they arrive, give them my phone number and tell them I’ll be in hiding for a while. So long.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than Shingen started heading toward the emergency staircase on the opposite end of the hallway from the regular stairs.

“Um, what kind of guest, Dad?”

“You’ll find out.”

Shinra sighed as his father proceeded down the hall without turning back.

Ultimately, he did not stop the man.

Shinra sensed a change in the sound around him and peered over the railing outside.

It had just begun to rain. The low buzz of the rainfall smothered the night city.



Damn...where did he go?

The elevator had already arrived on the ground floor by the time Celty got there. She determined that he couldn’t have gone far and ran around to scan the

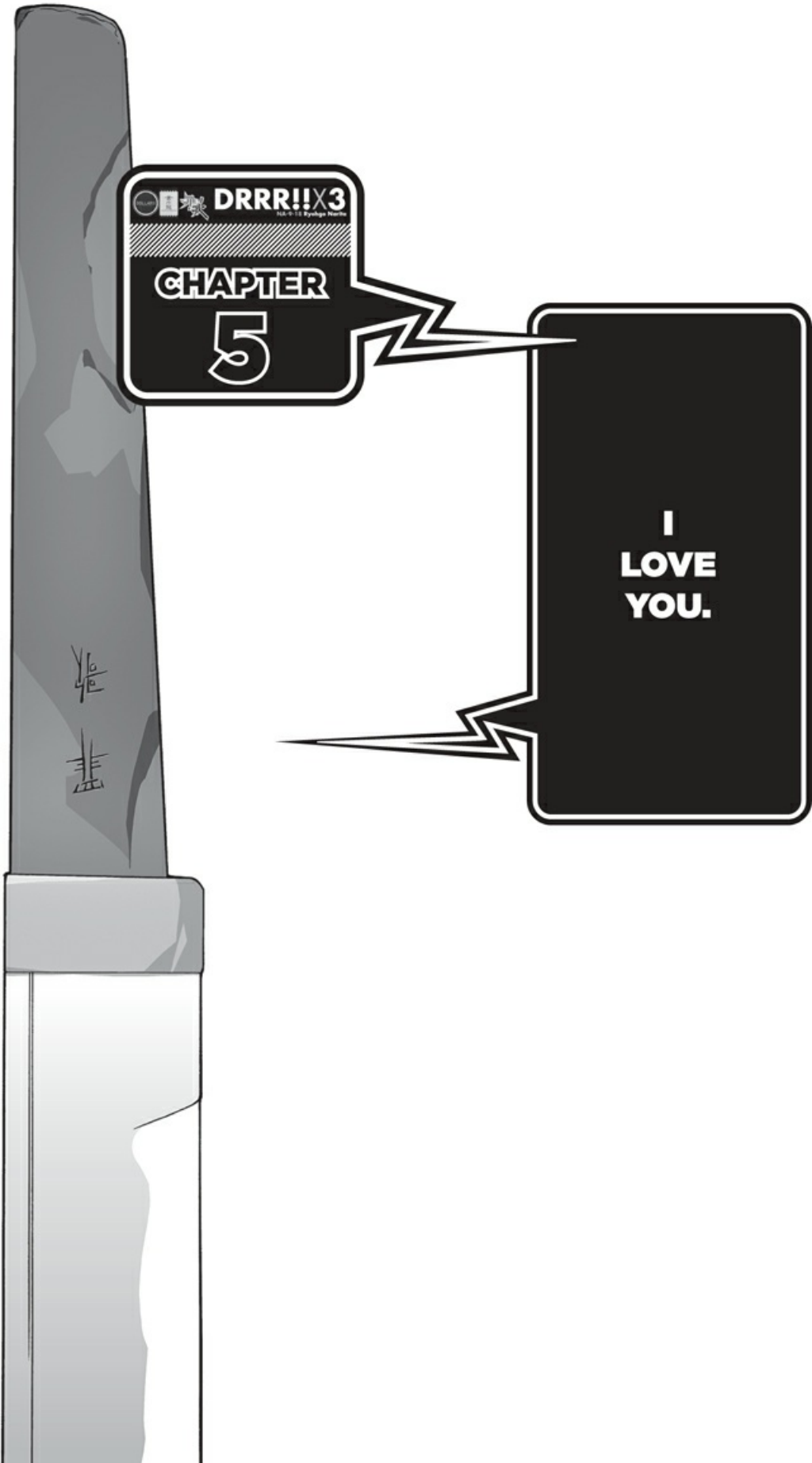
area—but she found no trace of Shingen.

If I let him escape from under my nose, he'll flee the country in no time. I have to track him down and put him through what happened in that horror manga I read last night!

She was about to leap onto her motorcycle and race off in a rage when the cell phone in the pocket of her shadow-leather jacket beeped the text message tone at her.

The sound brought Celty back to her rational senses. She checked the phone quickly, in case the message was from Shinra—and when she saw it, she took off running at once for the parking garage and her trusty Coiste Bodhar.

There was no city noise around the apartment building anymore, just the quiet carpet of rainfall.





Chapter 5: I Love You.

The accursed words echoed.

They screeched and cried within her head at all times, like the sound of cicadas.

And just like cicadas, as if trying to compress a lifetime of love into the single week they actually lived...

I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—I love humanity—I love you. I love you. I love you.—I love all of the human race!—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—I have the confidence to love every human being equally—I love you. I love you.—You don't have the confidence to do that, do you?—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—And I want to love you, too—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—But no, I can't—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—Because you are my host—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—So I will love—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—I will love humanity for you—I love you. I love you. I love you.—So love me—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—You can't live without me anymore, can you?—I love you. I love you.—So love me. It's the only option—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—I know that this is selfish—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—But there's no way to stop it—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—I shall teach you—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—About this emotion—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—About this passion—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—About this exultation—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—Oh, oh!—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.—Since you cannot love humans,

The incident was brought to an end when Anri managed to control all of the “children.” The slashings stopped, and the minds that Saika had taken over were returned to their hosts—except for when they needed to fabricate details about the slashings themselves, to make sure all of the ends met properly.

In other words, everyone who had been attacked claimed that they “couldn’t remember the face” of whoever attacked them.

After that, nothing ought to have changed.

As usual, the accursed voices spoke inside of Anri, echoing through her heart without end.

But she did not consider that to be a big problem.

She just observed both the world she saw through her eyes, and even her own mental state, from outside the picture frame.

Objectively. As if it was not her own concern.

If anything bad happened, she would be feeling it from a removed position where it didn’t hurt as much.

Every tragedy was as distant as a painting of a massacre in an art gallery.

That was the only part of this that made her think that perhaps she was insane.

Perhaps it was why she was able to put up with the screams of love without going mad herself.

The slashing incidents should have been buried in the darkness of mystery so that she could return to her normal life.

But since it all happened, something had indeed changed in her life.

At first she couldn’t tell what it was—this vague feeling that plagued her with anxiety.

Normally she could ignore such a nagging feeling as something within the picture frame, but she just couldn’t brush it aside this time.

After a long period of searching, she realized the answer.

The source of her trouble was actually outside of the frame.

Masaomi's...different somehow.

Two boys had emerged from the painting within the frame, reached out, and touched her heart.

Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida.

After suffering an injury with one of her “children” and spending several days in the hospital, Masaomi had changed gradually.

It wasn't a clear and obvious change.

Even his best friend, Mikado Ryuugamine, hadn't noticed anything was wrong.

But as she was accustomed to viewing the world from outside of the painting, Anri was always aware of the subtle change that was blooming within Masaomi.

After several days of this evolution, she came across an unpleasant topic in the chat room.

There were two groups of youths called color gangs, and each of them believed that the other side was responsible for the serial slashing attacks.

When she became aware of this, Anri was plagued with guilt.

She did not cause the attacks, but she had been relieved under the assumption that the incident was over. This leftover resentment suggested otherwise.

Something had to be done.

She summoned the “children” that her “children” created—in other words, from Saika's perspective as the progenitor, the grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

She did not want to use Saika's power to control anyone's mind, but she told herself that the use of force was necessary to stop pointless conflict.

She paid the price for this soon after.

She reached out to some of the boys known as Yellow Scarves among the slashing victims, hoping to use Saika's power to learn more detailed

information.

What she heard from one of them shocked her.

“Our boss is Masaomi Kida. I’ve seen him together with Mom before.”

She was stunned into silence.

“Um, he said he would avenge the girl with glasses, living vessel of Mom.”

The children all thought of the original Saika within Anri as their “mother.” While it was Anri who wielded control, they clearly only saw her as the host for their mother.

For a moment, she didn’t even process what the child had said.

Several minutes later, when Masaomi’s face finally flashed through her mind, she realized that a tremendous amount of cold sweat was trickling down her skin.

“It...can’t be...”

It was a lie. It had to be a mistake.

But Saika would not lie to the original, the mother.

Which meant the child had to be mistaken.

It was obviously just a boy with the same name who happened to also look like Masaomi.

It wasn’t possible for bright, cheery Masaomi, who claimed that he loved her, to stand at the head of a dangerous gang. She didn’t want to believe it.

Especially not that he had returned to the group in order to take revenge on her.

That was why she came.

To the ruined factory that was the gang’s hideout.

When Masaomi received the call, she decided to sneak after him, just in case.

After saying good-bye to Mikado, she went home and changed into her normal clothes before leaving again.

She already had two of the Yellow Scarves who were her children volunteer to

guard the entrance so that she could sneak onto the grounds undiscovered.

In the end, she saw the last thing she wanted to see.

She saw Masaomi...but a different Masaomi than the one she knew.

His actions and attitude were the same, but the air surrounding him couldn't have been more different.

And then, Anri realized.

That alien feeling she'd sensed since she wound up in the hospital was pouring out of Masaomi right before her, and she'd only picked up hints of it leaking out into his ordinary behavior.

And now that she knew everything, she was hiding in a crevice of the factory's scrap material, drenched by the rain in the darkness.



How had it come to this?

Her emotions roiled in confusion.

The rain beating her body grew harder and colder over time, churning her confusion into something greater.

Kida...

I have to escape...

Why is Kida...doing this...?

Who knows what'll happen...if they catch me...

She was full of fear and questions at the sight of her friend in a state she'd never seen before.

Meanwhile, she was being hunted by an unfamiliar army of yellow.

What would Masaomi say if they caught her?

Would he free her?

Or would he stay the unfamiliar Masaomi, the stranger?

Even if he spared her, what would he tell his companions?

And more importantly, if he learned the reason that she'd come, would it only cause him to change further?

Was she actually causing him great anguish by doing this?

What would happen with the Dollars group?

What was Masaomi planning to do?

Countless questions popped into her head and vanished.

The only thing that stayed behind was anxiety. She listened intently to her surroundings.

Most sound was swallowed by the rain, but she could hear a few people running around.

When she sensed the running sounds getting closer, Anri slid farther back into a tighter gap in the mountain of scrap metal.

The rain was perhaps both a help and a hindrance to her attempt to hide, but she didn't have the wherewithal to determine which it was. The only sound was the words of love.

The accursed voices knew the present situation.

It's so simple.

I'll love everyone.

That boy Masaomi.

And the other children in yellow.

I'll love them all equally.

Since you cannot love others,

I will love for you!

Deeply, deeply, deeply!

Anri immediately pushed the voices and their deal with the devil alike deep into the picture frame.

Everyone cut by Saika was implanted with Saika's voice somewhere in their minds. For that reason, while they retained their own wits, they were all under a

form of brainwashing in which they couldn't disobey the mother's orders.

Yes, using that ability might easily allow her to break out of her predicament by force.

But then...Kida...

Hurting Masaomi was out of the question, and Anri did not want to unnecessarily hurt anyone, period, including his friends. Normally those who hosted Saika were forced into slashing strangers, but Anri kept her mental control by forcing the voices inside the frame.

That was how she was able to completely ignore Saika's bargain, but that might not last forever in the current situation.

Even with Saika's children on her side, there was no telling what might happen to those boys after this was over, and taking them all over was out of the question. She would be no better than the slasher in that case.

Plus, if she did choose to force her way out...

Kida will recognize me.

It was an obvious and predictable outcome, but it was the worst kind of despair to Anri at this moment.

She didn't want to ruin the place she'd found for herself.

That was why she was here. But if Masaomi learned that she was not an ordinary person—if he learned that she was Saika...

Perhaps she ought to present herself and apologize. But she would still have to explain the situation—and that meant explaining about those who had let her into the factory grounds.

She could just say that she snuck in, but Masaomi would come to the conclusion that she couldn't have climbed over the walls on her own. As a matter of fact, she could do it with the extra help of Saika, but again, that would reveal her abnormality to him.

Why...why did it come to this?

She just didn't want things to be ruined.

If Masaomi learned about the secret of Saika, he might tell Mikado, too.

Perhaps he would listen to her if she begged him not to tell anyone, but she wasn't in any position to make such a demand.

Please let the night pass without anyone spotting me, she wished to no one but the rain. No sooner had the wish come to her than a voice from nearby crushed it without remorse.

"Hey! Don't you think someone could hide in here?"

They had found the crack in the piled-up junk that she used to slip back to her spot. She was hidden farther back, but if they started looking into the crevice, they would find her momentarily.

"Shit! It's too narrow for me to fit!" growled a deep voice.

A different voice hit Anri's eardrums, cutting him off.

"I'll go."

—!

Even in the rain, there was no mistaking it.

That was Masaomi's voice.



Masaomi circled around the factory from the opposite side to narrow down the search, but no intruder appeared.

He searched through the scrapped material and vehicles one by one, assuming that she had to be hiding somewhere. Eventually he reached the largest pile of scrap, which a number of boys were gathered before.

It was a mountain of rust and rubble, junked cars and metal, so large that it made him wonder if the factory was treating industrial waste. Or maybe this had served as shelter for some homeless for a while, and they'd added to the pile.

Being somewhat smaller than average, Masaomi offered to lead. He moved to squeeze into the narrow crevice. There were plenty of members skinnier than him, but he didn't want them thrashing the pile and potentially endangering the

life of the woman hiding inside.

If he was going to settle this peacefully, he needed to go in himself and make it clear that he meant her no harm.

But only if she doesn't mean harm herself.

"Sh-Shogun!" yelled a frightened voice, stopping him in the process of squeezing into the crack.

"Told you to call me Masaomi. What is it?"

"Uh, over there..."

Masaomi spotted a shadow in the direction they were looking.

Something even darker than the rain-soaked darkness.

So dark that it seemed to absorb that very rain...

A figure of pure, deep black.



Amid the tense silence, the cell phone clutched in Anri's hand vibrated and glowed.

"!"

When she saw the message on the screen, she immediately began to type a response.

Her fingers were clumsy, unfamiliar with the buttons.

The message to her was short and simple.

"I'm at the factory. Where are you?"

There was only one thing Anri could do, trapped as she was.

She asked for help through the cell phone she'd just recently purchased.

From another person who wasn't supposed to exist, either in public or in secret...



"The Black...Rider...?"

Masaomi's eyes went wide. It was the very person they'd just been talking about moments ago, an urban legend often seen around the neighborhood.

Anyone who lived in Ikebukuro long enough was familiar with the rider, but when facing the legendary figure with potential personal business on top of that, it was a much more imposing presence.

The other boys began to murmur among themselves.

"Uh...are you saying...that was the intruder?"

"N-no way! I'd have recognized that freak right away!" shrieked one of the boys, clearly terrified of their dark visitor. Masaomi turned around and saw that someone must have alerted the others, as the rest of the boys from inside the factory were now on their way, walking toward them as a crowd. Some of them were even running, and the tension was thick among the rain.

"It's the Black Rider!"

"The real thing?"

"Oh crap!"

"You serious?"

"Let's rumble!"

One boy spoke up and compressed all of these emotions further. "I-I saw the rider pop over the wall... Like, just leaped over it, bike and all."

They were the words of someone in a state of deluded confusion, but Masaomi had heard enough rumors about the Black Rider to know that this was expected. It's what the Black Rider can do, he thought. There was a more pressing concern at the moment.

What is the rider...doing here now?

The timing was perfect—almost expectant.

The rider was stopped about sixty feet away, apparently pulling out a cell phone in the middle of the rain.

He could see the faint glow of the screen in the darkness, but there was obviously no way to make out the contents from this distance.

Suddenly, the light vanished.

Here he comes, Masaomi guessed right as the motorcycle began to silently ride forward. It sped up slinkingly, like a predator with prey in its range, spraying the falling rain as it raced toward the group.

At first it seemed to be coming right for them, but the course veered just slightly—and the bike crashed directly into the pile of vehicles.

“Whoa!” the boys exclaimed. The motorcycle chugged its way over the mountain of wreckage like an off-road bike conquering a rocky path, only to vanish into the little valley between the piles, the very crack that Masaomi was facing.

The image burned itself into his eyes.

Countless shadows extended from the bike, tangling and gripping onto the scrap to pull the vehicle over the hump.

He had heard the rumors.

It seemed like too impressive a gimmick to be relegated to the level of “urban legend”—but there was no doubt that he had just witnessed something eerie, something unexplained, amid the pouring rain.

Confusion reigned over every inch of Masaomi.

Just as it did for the intruder shivering behind the rubble.



“Ce...Celty.”

Anri’s eyes were full of surprise, gratitude, and her ongoing confusion as the huge black thing descended from overhead.

“You okay? How did this happen?”

Celty produced her PDA for Anri to see, fashioning a tiny shadow umbrella to keep it out of the rain.

“S-sorry...”

“You can explain later. Let’s scram. Get on the back.”

“Um, o-okay...”

Anri tried to quickly get onto the motorcycle, but it being her first time, she had trouble straddling it. Celty helped her up and placed a hand on her face.

“Uh...”

Black shadow began to spread over Anri’s features, until just a few seconds later, she was wearing a helmet very similar to the one Celty wore herself. Only the shape was the same, however; Anri’s was pitch-black.

There was a small viewport so that Anri could see, and the little glowing PDA screen shone through.

“Better to keep your face hidden while we escape, I’m guessing.”

“Th...thank you!”

It would have been bad for Masaomi to catch sight of her face, though Celty wouldn’t have known that fact. Anri was filled with gratitude.

“Hang on to me tight,” Celty typed, then stashed the PDA away and cranked the throttle.

A sound like a horse whinnying erupted from the engine of the bike, and Anri experienced a forward lurch in gravity, like the instant a roller coaster begins to dip.



The boys bore witness.

A black shadow leaped from the small hill of scrap as the motorcycle engine screeched.

The only difference was that now a girl wearing a black helmet was seated behind the rider.



When Celty and Anri emerged from the piles of junk, they saw several dozen young men waiting for them. Among the crowd were a few girls, too, but they stared at the two just like the boys.

They were surrounded by a wall of humanity on all sides. Such a wall would be easy to break, but it would only guarantee that some of the Yellow Scarves were injured in the incident.

Are they even aware...that I'm a member of the Dollars?

If that was the case, any act of open hostility here was a bad idea. The leader of the Dollars was an acquaintance of sorts, and she was a properly registered member of the Dollars—but taking an antagonistic attitude here would cause trouble for a great many people beyond just herself.

It would be fantastic if the situation were resolvable through dialogue, but that didn't seem like an option at this point.

"Who are you, huh? I've seen you around for ages. Sorry, it's just that I'm a fan, see? Can I have an autograph?" came a flirtatious, out-of-place question.

Celty focused in the direction of the voice and saw a single boy approach the bike.

"First of all, do you understand Japanese? Let's start with that. Do you know the word for love? It's ai. That refers to me: Ai am in love with the girl sitting behind you. And I don't appreciate you swooping in and taking her away from me."

Huh? Isn't that...the one who's always hanging out with Mikado and Anri...?

"No response, huh? Well, maybe you really are foreign. Actually, if it turns out you are a woman after all, I think that'd be perfect. Love isn't me—love is you. How about that? I always thought the contours of that riding suit were too slender to be male. I wouldn't care about you if you're a guy, but I could love you based on the riding suit alone if you're female. Love a nun, love the habit. What do you say? I'd be perfectly content to love you and your passenger at the same time, if you want."

He's sharp...and oddly pervertical.

Wait, was pervertical even a word? Celty was momentarily distracted by her own thought process as the boy strode over to her, step by step.

That's when she realized something.

As Masaomi approached, the arm Anri had clinging to Celty's waist trembled slightly. She pressed her upper half into the small of Celty's back, trying to hide her helmet-concealed face even farther.

I see now...

Anri didn't want him to recognize her.

Celty decided that now was not the moment to ponder why the boy Anri associated with was among the Yellow Scarves. All that mattered right now was to get the girl away from this place. She abandoned the PDA method and decided to go straight for the urban legend angle.

If she tried to reason with them, they would demand that Anri show her face to them.

Of course, I'm sure Shinra or Izaya would be able to talk their way out of this.

But sadly, Celty did not have the power to extract them from this situation through dialogue alone.

Well, if he wants a foreigner, he'll get one. And hey, he's not wrong—I just happen to understand the language, she noted ironically. Celty ignored whatever Masaomi was saying and slowly expanded her shadow in a vortex of black.

Ugh. This feels exactly like what happened last night...

Celty was momentarily gripped with fear as she remembered her run-in with the police. But the trembling of the girl clinging to her brought Celty's sense of reason back. Under the cover of the rain, she materialized her shadow into a different shape this time.

But I bear some of the blame for yesterday. Then again, even if I hadn't, it wouldn't have changed the outcome.

The shadow extended from Celty's feet, writhing like a snake as it gradually condensed to take on solid thickness.

At least I can say...I feel no shame in rescuing her now.

The shadow grew larger and faster over time, channeling the waves of menace she exuded. The majority of that menace and anger was actually directed toward herself, but she pretended not to notice this.



"Whoa... Wh-what is that thing?"

“No...way...”

At first, the boys assumed that it was just the rain spraying off of the ground, but they gradually murmured louder as they noticed the abnormal activity of the shadow.

And if I am at fault, this doesn't count, because I'm not realizing it.

For an instant, the entire ruined factory was dominated and subsumed by a single noise.

BoOoovvooovvvWVWWwwwvvvvvooooooЯяяяooo

It was less the sound of an engine than the cry of some creature.

They could tell it was an animal.

But the boys couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of animal it was.

The fierce, eerie shriek of some thing that did not actually exist in this world.

The black motorcycle's engine roared a sound that came directly from the depths of hell itself.

The sound resonated with the shadow creeping across the ground, each amplifying the other as it sped up toward the wall of youth.



In the past, Celty had tested herself to see how far the shadow could go. She stood on the Yamanote Line and extended it all the way to the next train station over, but she was unable to tell what was beyond that and had to prematurely end the experiment.

She had always tried to limit the use of any mammoth shadows to cut down on the image of herself as a monster, but that hesitation had disappeared since the Dollars' meeting a year ago.

Ultimately, that lack of caution had come back to bite her with that scare the previous evening.

But it wasn't because I knew I had a get-out-of-jail-free card...

The shadow erupted upward and took a form that resembled a gigantic horse.

It only resembled a horse because in the spot where its head should have

been, there was nothing.

The headless horse leaped upward with another braying from the engine and charged straight at the boys. The ones directly in its path screamed and leaped to the sides for safety.

The horse plunged straight through the resulting empty space, then melted back into the earth, leaving only a long path of shadowy ground behind.

And most importantly...there are no police here! Celty laughed selfishly. She took her partner's engine into a high-pitched shriek. The headless horse roared, planting seeds of terror into the ears of all who heard it.

It was as if she wanted to force the others to feel the same fear that she had experienced the day before.

"This is bad."

"Huh?" said one of the nearby Yellow Scarves, turning to look at his leader.

"H-hey, Masaomi... What...is that...thing?" asked a different boy, his throat tight with fear.

Masaomi shook his head. "What makes you think I'd know that?"

He was unable to process what he was seeing as an illusion, but he didn't want to accept it as reality, either. He found himself taking a step backward.

"All I know is that thing is dangerous. It's not like us... It came from somewhere else."

Masaomi felt a cold sweat trickling down his back. He stared at the back of the Black Rider.

"Okay, but...what about the chick riding on the back of that 'dangerous thing'? What's up with that?"

"D-don't let 'em get away!" one of the terrified Yellow Scarves shouted.

"Wait! Don't just attack them!" Masaomi commanded, trying to control his partners, but the shock wave spread through the other boys. None of them was reckless enough to stand directly in front of the bike, but several were ready to swing pipes and two-by-fours from the sides.

The result of this action took them even further into shock.



Anri felt a breeze blow through the visor of her helmet. She looked out at the scene.

It's Kida, she realized, noticing that he was staring right at her. She looked away. Hopefully she had mistaken someone else for her friend, but the face she'd just seen was too much of Masaomi Kida to be a coincidence.

The black helmet completely covered Anri's face, but she couldn't help the terrifying feeling that he was going to realize who she was.

The moment she turned her eyes away from him, she saw something else, something that completely overrode her own fears.

It was the dull silver gleam of a metal pipe, hurled directly at the motorcycle carrying her and Celty.

Look out.

Madness trained in their direction.

Weapon hurled in their direction.

Anri's reflexes took over in the face of these two simultaneous volleys, driving her into motion. Normally, the sight would be pushed back into the picture frame—but realizing that Masaomi was just nearby left her mind unable to perform that act in the moment.

Instead, her body acted without her.



Her arm throbbed, and the cursing voices that rang throughout her heart bellowed in one loud voice.

In her haste to not spend an instant of time listening to them, Anri yanked the throbbing in her arm directly out of her body, all at once.

It slid right into Anri's hand at the same time that it ripped through the sleeve of her jacket in one smooth motion.

At the exact moment that the metal pipe bore down on Celty, she turned *it* onto the projectile without thinking, and...



It might as well have been a stage magician trick.

As the bike sped away, stones, umbrellas, lumber, and scrap material flew through the air at it. Most of the junk hit nothing but air or other projectiles, unable to handle the acceleration of the motorcycle—but a few of them were perfectly placed to intersect the bike's path.

But just as the first pipe was about to collide with it, a metal sound reached the boys' ears.

Twing. The sound of something freezing instantly. Or perhaps endless mic feedback compressed into a single moment.

What they saw next was two halves of a metal pipe floating in midair.

Next, a stone heading for the motorcycle crumbled into dust, disappearing amid the rain.

In what little time they had to wonder what was happening, a flying piece of wood provided the answer.

It was in the hand of the girlish figure on the rear seat of the bike.

A long, sharp cylinder that gleamed in the little amount of streetlight illumination that reached the factory.

"A...katana...?" Masaomi heard someone say.

That word brought a fresh image to the mind of everyone present.

The slasher.

They saw clearly that the figure sitting in the rear was holding a katana.

Stunned by the sudden appearance of this deadly weapon, all the boys stopped throwing objects and scrambled away from the path of the bike. When the person in the rear seat noticed this, she slid the katana away somehow, in the same magician's way that she produced it.

Before the boys could regain their footing, the black motorcycle picked up speed, attempting to break its way right through one of the exits.

It roared.

It *roiled*.

Dancing along with the whinnying of the engine.

Drops of black shadow mingled among the spray of the rain.

The rising shadow seeped back into the motorcycle and its rider.

Black mist enveloped both person and bike, giving it the momentary appearance of one giant creature.

It leaped in time with another bray from the engine—just as the headless horse had moments earlier.

Seated on its back was a girl, her face hidden by a pitch-black helmet.

A headless horse ridden by a girl with a silver blade.

Such an image was not their intention, but as they rode through the darkness, they created the very picture of the headless dullahan from the fairy tales.

The boys didn't even have the wherewithal to throw objects anymore. It seemed to be dawning on them that perhaps just *letting them go* was the safest plan of action.

"Can a katana...actually cut a steel pipe...in half?" someone murmured, picking up a piece of the severed pipe. The boys around him examined the shockingly clean cut—and began to pray in earnest that the Black Rider left them in peace.

Now that no one blocked its way, the motorcycle rode along the path of shadow it had created for itself toward the exit of the factory.

The few guards still standing there had no way to stop the speeding bike. The

black *thing* simply turned its back on the helpless youths and vanished, the same way it had entered—without a sound.

The scene was completely silent except for the soft pattering of rain, as if nothing had ever appeared.

Amid the rain, Masaomi had a thought.

It wasn't just Masaomi. Most of the boys in the gathering reached one solid conclusion from the event they'd witnessed.

Their heads were churning with a deluge of information.

The rumor that the Black Rider was one of the Dollars.

The slasher, who still hadn't been caught.

The suspicion that the slasher might also be a member of the Dollars.

And the intruder who had been snooping around after them.

An intruder swinging a katana.

And the Black Rider swiftly coming to the intruder's rescue.

Masaomi didn't know if his conclusion was correct or not.

He didn't even know if he should hope that his guess was wrong or be certain that he'd finally nailed down a proper opponent.

But there was one thing he was sure of at last.

No matter what he thought personally, there was no way to maintain complete control of his followers after what they'd just seen.

"Hey," he said, soaking in the rain.

"Wha...?" responded a young man at his side.

"Do you know what a dullahan is?"

"Uh. Umm...nope."

The kid still hadn't recovered from the shock of the experience. It was all he could do to summon that response, his face ghostly.

Masaomi quietly continued, "A dullahan's a headless knight on a headless

horse who visits the homes of those who are about to die. I guess you might call it a Grim Reaper of sorts.”

“Uh, okay...”

In contrast to the serenity of Masaomi’s voice, the youths around him looked more concerned than ever. He ignored their consternation. “That’s just something I heard from Yumasaki when he got all worked up about it a while back.”

He did not elaborate on that thought, retreating within his own mind.

But if that monster is one of those things...does that mean one of us is supposed to die soon?

Shit...that’s not ominous at all.

Several minutes later.

“I wonder why,” Masaomi muttered as he stared up into the rainy sky, the chaos of the earlier scene morphing into solid tension that gripped the group. “Why would I suddenly feel like I wanted to see Saki at a moment like this?”

His thought was swallowed by the rain. No one answered him.

The memories of the girl in the hospital reverberated within Masaomi. He also thought of a pair of other figures, two of his classmates. But they were the people he wanted to see *least* at this moment in time. The images of Mikado and Anri melted into the rain.

Only the picture of Masaomi’s former lover remained in his heart.

The rain buzzed onward, showing no signs of stopping.

Masaomi strode slowly, eyeing the wall of the ruined factory. His comrades had covered it with their own graffiti and meaningless scribbles. Surrounded by tags and pieces of varied designs was a hastily scribbled message done in yellow spray paint.

THE BLUE SKY IS ALREADY DEAD.

“The sky is dead.”

It was a phrase used as the slogan of the Yellow Scarves Rebellion in real life,

the movement that kicked off the beginning of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* epic about ancient Chinese history.

Masaomi hadn't imagined that any of his rough-and-tumble companions knew that phrase. He recognized it, but only because he'd read a manga about the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* story.

He looked back up at the sky, sensing that the string of events that had just happened was setting something into motion.

"Well, it's not blue," he snorted ironically in an effort to bottle up his honest emotions, his eyes open to the sky despite the falling rain. "But it's not yellow, either."

The rain buzzed onward, showing no signs of stopping.

Fshh, fshh, fshh, fshh.



A few minutes later, somewhere in Tokyo

Celty rode the route to Ikebukuro, spattered by the rain.

The girl clinging to her back did not speak, either because she knew Celty was driving or for some other reason. Celty chose not to pry. They maintained their silence as they rode through the rain.

So, what to do now? Celty wondered.

The circumstances were clearly too serious to simply drop her off at her home and leave. Celty might not have anything to do with the situation, but Anri was not a stranger. She was not such a pragmatist or head-in-the-sand pacifist that she would ignore the girl's plight.

If anything, Celty did not help others out of calculating self-interest—she would extend a helping hand to anyone she saw who needed one, regardless of if she had a reason.

She wasn't omnipotent, so there were times—as with Shingen—when she had to pick and choose.

I guess I could bring her home with me...and kick Shinra out so she can change.

Should she buy Anri a fresh change of clothes, then? She couldn't give the girl Shinra's clothes, and the ones that Shinra bought Celty and asked her to wear were bizarre, creepy things like swimsuits, maid outfits, and single button-up shirts with nothing else.

Fortunately, she did have the twenty thousand yen she'd confiscated from Shingen not long ago. She thought she remembered that there was a Uniqlo nearby and sensed around to get a grasp of the area—when her mind caught a glimpse of white.

Even with the umbrella, there weren't many people who would venture out into Ikebukuro wearing a white lab coat. As soon as she picked up the white gas mask peeking out around the umbrella, Celty increased the speed of her motorcycle just a bit.

That sly rascal.

She could block his path in an acrobatic manner, but Celty wasn't agitated enough that she'd forget the presence of Anri behind her. Instead, she killed the engine sound and snuck up on Shingen as he tread on the sidewalk, casting ropes of shadow that tangled up her target's left foot and the nearby guardrail before he was aware that she was there.

“Wha—?!”

Shingen lurched forward and nearly fell. When he noticed Celty standing in his way, his panic was clear even through the gas mask.

“Ce-Celty!”

Looks like he was slipping away from the apartment to go somewhere else.

Celty cracked the knuckles of both hands, delighting in her good fortune.

She considered beating him to an immobile state, then taking him back to the apartment with Anri. The horsepower of the black bike—an evolution of an actual headless horse—easily surpassed those of regular motorcycles its size. She could fashion a sidecar made of shadow, which would be enough to carry heavy objects like that and was one of the reasons Celty was so suited for courier work.

The sidewalk was empty up ahead, so she stopped the motorcycle there for the moment and showed Anri her PDA.

“Sorry, give me a minute.”

As Anri blinked in surprise, Shingen spat disgustedly. “Damn, you really can do anything with that shadow of yours! Don’t you ever feel a bit guilty or self-conscious about having such a ridiculous trick up your sleeve? And who’s that with you?”

He struggled against her binding shadow, trying to escape, before giving up and questioning the girl still sitting on the rear of Celty’s bike.

“That doesn’t matter. Are you ready for this?”

Celty advanced on Shingen, still cracking her knuckles. Anri watched with curiosity and raised the thin shadowy visor that narrowed her vision to get a better look.

“Oh...?” Shingen murmured, noticing the distinctive round glasses visible through the gap in the helmet. “Are you...?”

The next moment, that thought spilled out of his mouth. “Are you the daughter of Sonohara-dou?”

“Huh?”

Sonohara-dou.

That was the name of the place where Anri had lived, the antiques shop that her parents owned and managed. A sudden shock ran through Celty’s body.

Oh no!

Celty knew the truth.

She knew that the Saika that had made its home in Anri was originally owned by Shingen.

Somewhere in what she presumed was her brain, she recalled what Shinra had said.

“He actually owned it until a few years ago, when he sold it to an antiques trader he knows. I believe the trader’s name was Sonohara.”

After that, Celty had contact with Anri on several occasions, learned that the girl's parents had died in a slashing incident in the past, and assumed that there were complicated circumstances behind that. But she had never asked Anri about it directly.

"Ah, such a shame about your paren— *Mwurr!*"

"Lucky you."

Celty deemed it unwise to allow Anri to be any more upset, so she covered the entirety of Shingen's head in shadow and got onto the bike again.

"Let's go."

"Um, Celty, who is this? How does he know me...?"

"He's a pale-faced monster, an evil boogeyman who reads the hearts of others and pretends to know them to take advantage," Celty lied to keep things simple. She turned the grip throttle, lamenting how much of a bother this had become.

"I think you should keep your face hidden." She lowered the visor of Anri's helmet and removed the shadow enveloping Shingen's head.

There were no more messages from her after that. The motorcycle rode onward through the rain.

The drops continued to pelt them, cold and wet.

Under the uncertain sky, Celty felt an eerie sense of unease.

All she could do was ride.

For now, she was still nothing but an outsider.

She rode on through the rain, understanding her place in the events.

Silently, so silently.



Chat room

—KANRA HAS ENTERED THE CHAT—

<Gooood evening! Huh? Is it just Tarou tonight?> {Good evening.}

{Seems that way.}

<Darn.>

{Are you disappointed? lol}

<No, but there's not much for us to talk about, is there?> {Hmm...well, actually, there was something I wanted to ask you.}

<Wow, what? What is it? If I can answer it here, I'll tell you anything you want to know.>

<Private Mode> <And I'll even waive my usual fee.>

{...}

{Umm, I didn't see many of the folks in yellow around today.}

<Ahh. What if they were just having a meeting somewhere?> {Er, well... Have those Yellow Scarves always been in Ikebukuro?}

<Let's see, they showed up for good around three years ago.> {Uh-huh.}

<At the start, they were pretty chill, but there was quite a ruckus when they clashed with Blue x Blue...the "Blue Squares."> {A gang war, then?}

<Yes, although it didn't turn into front-page public news. The girlfriend of the Yellow Scarves' leader was kidnapped and got hurt really bad... It was an ugly situation in many ways.> {Many ways?}

<Many ways.>

<The Yellow Scarves calmed down after that...but a few years ago, another team started a huge war, and a bunch of people got arrested. After that, the color gangs started to fade out from the scene. Also, the Blue Squares were dealing a lot of drugs...until they disappeared.> {Because of the police?}

<No, they caught the notice of a man named Shiki from the Awakusu-kai, and they couldn't keep selling after that.> {Awakusu-kai?}

<Just one of the associations of, shall we say, "professional gentlemen" in Ikebukuro, of which there are many.> {...I'm amazed you can just pull up names like that out of a hat.}

<Eek! A girl's got all kinds of information hidden in her pockets! ☆> {That does

not call for the use of a ☆.}

{So because of that, they had to disappear?}

<And they picked a fight with one of the people you're never meant to cross.>
{Oh...you mean Shizuo?}

<If you give me some kind of present, I'll tell you more sometime.>

<Private Mode> <After this point, it'll cost you.> <Private Mode> <I'll make it five thousand yen.>

{...I'll pass, thanks.}

<Awwwww. C'mon, I was hoping to hear you beg for it.> <You're no fun!>

—KANRA HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

{Wow, Kanra, how low can you sink?!}

{But, ultimately...}

{The Yellow Scarves stuck around.}

{Is it because the Blue whatevers disappeared?}

—THE KANRA HAS ENTERED THE CHAT—

{“The”? That's a bold change.}

<Hee-hee, just a change of heart.>

<Now, about the Yellow Scarves...>

<Private Mode> <...Here's the deal. The Blue Squares didn't die out.> <Private Mode> <The Yellow Scarves' leader got tired of fighting and left the team...>
<Private Mode> <And they joined up with the remaining Yellow Scarves.>
<Private Mode> {Huh?}

<Private Mode> {They had a merger?}

<Private Mode> <That's the quick way to describe it.> <Private Mode> <The thing is, who's really going to keep track of which person is in which group, aside from the leaders and important members? If you take off your blue gear, then say you want in with the yellow side, who's going to care?> <Private Mode> <Plus, when the Yellow Scarves were weakened after the loss of their leader,

they might have welcomed the chance for some fresh blood.> <Private Mode>
{Then, the former leader...?}

<Private Mode> <Probably has no idea.>

<Private Mode> <I bet he'd feel real conflicted.> <Private Mode> <Knowing the
guys who sent his girlfriend to the hospital were working with his old pals.>
<Private Mode> <I bet it would be fascinating to tell him that.> <Private Mode>
{Let's not. That's pretty tacky.}

<Private Mode> <Yeah, I won't. That's it for story time.>

<To tell the truth, I hardly know a thing about them.> {Hey, don't lead me on!}

<Anyway, the Yellow Scarves have changed a lot over the years.> <And then
you've got the recent slashings.>

<I'd be careful if I were you.>

{I'll try to keep my distance.}

<Private Mode> {I'll send a message around to the Dollars urging them not to
instigate anything with the other side.}

<Private Mode> <That's a good idea. But...> <Private Mode> {But?}

<Private Mode> <I don't know if you're aware of this...> <Private Mode> <But
there are some people playing both sides of the Dollars and Yellow Scarves. Be
careful out there.> <Private Mode> {...}

<Private Mode> {I will. But if we tell the other Dollars that there's no
connection, maybe that will trickle back to the Yellow Scarves through them.}

<Private Mode> <Assuming it really wasn't the Dollars who did it.> <Private
Mode> <There are no rules in your group, and you're not keeping tabs on every
single member.> <Private Mode> <Perhaps one of the Dollars is acting as the
slasher outside of your sphere of knowledge.> <Private Mode> <It's the Dollars'
system. If you're hoping to stay on "this side"...you ought to be prepared for that
kind of rude awakening.> <Private Mode> {...I'll keep it in mind.}

{Well, I've got to go for now.}

{Thanks for everything.}

—TAROU HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

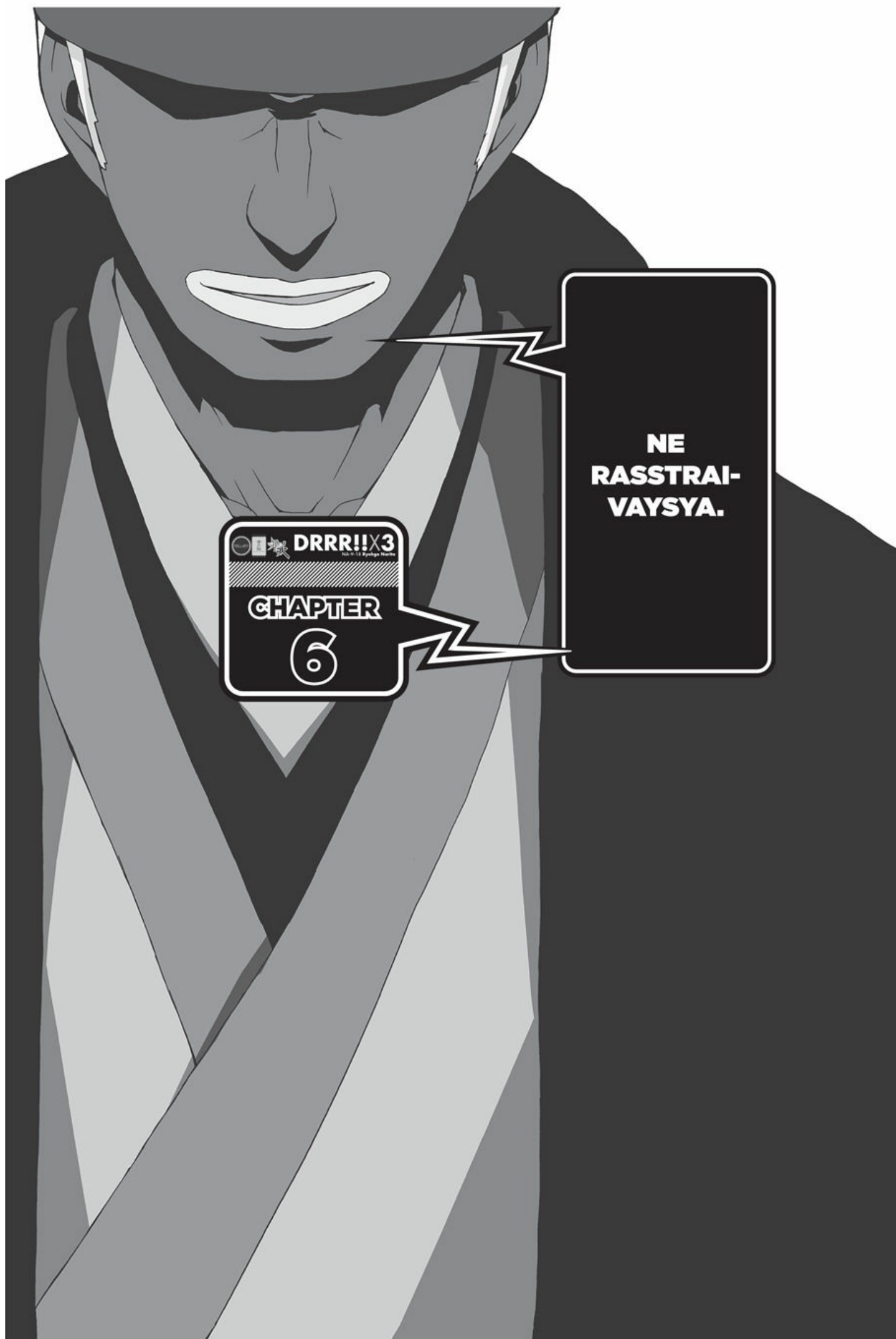
<Okay. Good night! ☆> <Maybe I laid the threat on a little heavy. Tee-hee!>
<Well, good night.>

—THE KANRA HAS LEFT THE CHAT—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—

—THE CHAT ROOM IS CURRENTLY EMPTY—



DRRR!!X3
CHAPTER
6

НЕ
РАССТРАИ-
ВАЙСЯ.



Chapter 6: Ne Rasstraivaysya.

Class 1-A, Raira Academy

“We had quite a splendid sunset last night, but as you can see, today it is raining. Ahem. I do wonder if you’re aware of this. Ahem. There is a saying, ‘The day after a sunset is bright, but it rains after a morning glow.’ This is a product of a migratory anticyclone, and the saying holds true in the spring and fall, but not for summer or winter. Ahem. So my point is. Ahem. Even in March, our climate is still stuck in winter. Ahem...”

The homeroom teacher, Mr. Kitagoma, who was also the earth sciences teacher, rattled off a list of facts while the pouring rain rattled off the windows. It wasn’t clear if what he was saying was actually useful or not.

The elderly teacher mumbled his speech to a close, then proceeded to briskly take attendance. Everything was going normally, just like any other day. Until...

“Sonohara... Sonohara? Hmm? Strange. No Sonohara today.”

The rest of the class shared looks. It was the last person they’d expect to be absent. Some of them gave knowing glances to Mikado. He was looking around even more than necessary, clearly unnerved by her absence.

“Hmm, perhaps she is sick. Ahem. Take good care of yourselves.” The teacher gave the class a quick once-over. “Tomorrow is the last day of school. Ahem. So I’d like to properly wrap up the entire year with the entire class. Ahem.”

Kitagoma continued taking roll as if nothing had happened, but Mikado’s heart was roiling with an indescribable anxiety.

Naturally, a lot had to do with the absence of Anri, a model student. Perhaps the wounds she’d suffered from the slasher began paining her again. Maybe she’d even run across the slasher a second time. The troubling possibilities raced through his mind.

After school, he heard another piece of information that worried him even more.

Masaomi wasn't at school, either.



Hospital room, Raira University Hospital, Ikebukuro

"What's up, Masaomi? You seem down today," the girl in the bed noted to Masaomi as he stared out the window.

Masaomi thought he was keeping up his normal act, but the girl saw right through him with a gentle smile.

"How can you tell? I thought I was acting normally... I guess you really must be psychic."

Were his emotions really showing on his face? Masaomi spun back with a false grin on his lips. The girl's smile had not changed.

"Because you hardly ever skip school to come see me."

"Oh...yeah."

He had ditched school to come visit her bedside. The receptionist hadn't bothered him much about his visit, probably assuming that he was a younger college student—Masaomi was in his regular street clothes.

Just as Saki had pointed out, Masaomi recognized that his emotions were in an unstable state. After what happened the previous day, he was unsure if he could maintain his usual frame of mind. Not to suggest that the way he acted around Mikado and Anri was a pretense—but that he was afraid that if they saw him now, it might only cause them to worry. That possibility frightened him.

But at this moment, only the girl in this hospital room knew the side of him that Mikado and Anri did not. She knew the Masaomi who grew up in Ikebukuro.

To Masaomi, who lived apart from his parents, Saki was an outsider, another person that he could return to and feel like himself—despite the fact that she was part of the past he wanted to forget.

In analyzing his own emotions, Masaomi grew uncomfortable. So for the first time in ages, he asked the girl a question he had asked her countless times.

“Hey, Saki.”

“What?”

“Are you sure...you don’t...bear a grudge against me?”

Saki’s eyes went wide, but once again, her smile returned.

“You’re so dumb. I can’t believe how dumb you are, Masaomi.”

“I’m dumb?”

“Yes. Even if I did hate you, you’d still come back, wouldn’t you?” she said, confidently striding directly into the heart of his emotional turmoil. She repeated the phrase that had tormented him for so long: “You’ll never, ever be able to escape your past.”

“Never?”

“Never. That’s why you come back to me, isn’t it?”

“You just think that because it’s what Izaya told you,” he said sardonically. Masaomi knew that she worshipped Izaya Orihara. He’d known it since the day he met her.

But he still fell in love with her.

By this point, it should all have been in the past—but the past would not let him go. It was just as Izaya had once told him.

Saki looked slightly troubled by his sarcasm. “We’ll see about that. But I think it’s a good thing that Izaya told me that, you know? After all...I really love you now.”

“If Izaya had told you to hate me, you would have come to stab me in an instant, wouldn’t you?”

“Maybe I would have...but you’d still love me, Masaomi.”

“But that’s over now. Kaput. The end,” he said in jest, but Saki only repeated herself.

“You can’t escape your past, Masaomi. Your current troubles are based in your past, aren’t they?”

“ ... ”

“If you can’t escape it, you should face it and beat it in a fight.”

“Well, if it was possible to clean my slate with you by simply fighting that part of my past head-on, I’d do it.”

For the first time today, Masaomi smiled at the bedridden girl.

She saw his expression and put on her happiest smile yet. “Why don’t you?”

“I can’t fight you, Saki.”

With a self-deprecating grin, Masaomi left the room. As he left, he closed the door to cut off her happy gaze.

“That’s why...all I can do is run.”

The group wasn’t formed for fighting. I just wanted a place to hang out.

He borrowed things from his new city, pretending they were his own, in order to tell his childhood friend about his new home. Masaomi always felt conflicted about this.

It was why he wanted companions here. To find his own place in the city.

But the group was not truly a place he was meant to return.

He knew that now.

Among the Yellow Scarves...the only “place” for him was in Saki Mikajima.

Now he was working for the sake of his friend, his new place in the world.

But as he was still stuck with the Yellow Scarves, he found himself back in that hospital room.

Whom did he really love?

Masaomi stared at the ceiling of the hospital hallway, wondering what the answer was.

He did not find it.

A doctor on break spoke to Masaomi as he waited for the elevator.

“Oh, Masaomi. No school today?”

“I left early just so I could see your face, Doctor. No, really.”

“Well, at least you’re in a good mood. I hope you can share that energy of yours with Saki.”

“Yeah... How is she doing?” he asked politely. The doctor, who was in her thirties, kept a cool expression on her face.

“As I told you before, her nerves are all connected, so if she undergoes rehabilitation, she should be able to walk. It seems to be the mental shock that is afflicting her more. Oh, and she hardly ever talks, except when you and another fellow who looks a bit like a club host come by—then she’s a real chatterbox.”

After having just finished a conversation with her, it was hard to believe that Saki did not normally speak. But the doctor wasn’t lying to him. He knew that before she was hospitalized, she wasn’t the type to initiate a conversation with others.

Except for one man, the so-called “fellow who looks a bit like a club host”: Izaya Orihara.

Masaomi hid his emotions from his face.

The doctor continued, “She ought to be recovering at home by now. But she has no relatives, so... Anyway, the hospital funds are coming from somewhere, so we’re happy to keep tending to her. Make sure you keep coming so she doesn’t get lonely. She’s really been much happier lately, now that you’re visiting again.”

“I’ll do my best.” He smiled weakly.

The chatty doctor narrowed her eyes and leaned closer. “Feel like coming over tonight? I’m on the early shift, and tomorrow’s my day off,” she propositioned.

Masaomi easily deflected her advance. “Sorry, I’ve got a prior engagement.”

“Everybody always wants a piece of you. If I were your legitimate girlfriend, I’d have stabbed you by now.”

“And then helped me heal, right? The healing power of your love would work like gangbusters on me.”

“It’s both incredible and frustrating how blithe you are about everything...”

Masaomi summoned a smile with all of his heart for her and left the hospital without another word. He stared up at the sky again, unable to put a name to the emotion he was feeling now.

Every single day he talked to women, murmuring words of love to them, as regularly as breathing. It wasn't, as Saki claimed, because he was actually trying to reaffirm his love for her. Masaomi loved all women equally, at all times.

But is what I feel...actually love?

The dark sky returned nothing but raindrops. Masaomi headed into Ikebukuro, growing damper by the minute.



Sixtieth Floor Street, Ikebukuro

"See, that's what I'm saying—we've been using the word *tsundere* for years and years. And now that it's grown into this mainstream thing on TV shows and everything, it makes me feel empty in the same way that you feel when a band you've always liked just blows up and gets huge."

"You just want to hog your favorite things to yourself. But I don't mind, because I'm honest about liking things that are cool."

"Hmph! It's not like I actually care about the word *tsundere* or anything!"

"Ha-ha, Yumacchi just turned into a *tsundere*."

The two chattered away about the usage of the term, referring to those who pretended to dislike things they secretly loved, as they slowly made their way to Sunshine City. The rain was still falling, but they were all smiles under their umbrellas without a care for the weather in the three-dimensional world.

On the other hand, the man who walked ahead of the pair just shook his head in disgust. "I keep telling you two not to talk about that stuff in town."

"Actually, we're really holding back today, Kadota."

"That's right, Yumacchi's doing his best to keep it light. He hasn't quoted any lines from a manga or said the name of a single two-dimensional character!"

"Shut up."

The grunt was muffled by the sound of the rain, but the glint in his eyes as he glared over his shoulder was enough to silence the two.

As Yumasaki and Karisawa sulked like scolded children, their overseer and guardian Kadota let out a long sigh.

They were a pair of otaku chatting about their obscure interests and a man who exuded the atmosphere of a loitering delinquent. The combination looked unthinkable at a glance, but as a matter of fact, they were always together.

Yumasaki and Karisawa looked normal, but on the inside they were irredeemable connoisseurs of the two-dimensional arts. Since the summer, Yumasaki had repeated a constant muttered refrain about a “dream demon maid,” which set Kadota on edge for no good reason.

For his own part, Kadota was a voracious reader, but he only loved books as a fiction separate from reality. To him, any book (even nonfiction) was a means to visit a world of dreams.

But Yumasaki and Karisawa, whom he’d known for years, had traveled to the world of fiction so heavily that they no longer could be trusted to discern the difference between fiction and reality, and Kadota had no way to wake them up.

“Ugh...so where should we go next?”

“I was thinking we could swing by Animate for the latest merch. But we took the train today, so space is limited. If we had the van, we could buy all kinds of stuff and stash it there,” Karisawa noted, laughing dryly.

Kadota sighed for at least the hundredth time that day. “You better pick up something for Togusa by way of apology. He was super-pissed.”

“It makes no sense. I was sure he’d be over the moon about it.”

Normally this trio traveled around in a van driven by their companion named Togusa, but when the door was recently damaged, Yumasaki had a new door installed—complete with a decal of a sparkling anime girl. Togusa nearly exploded just from seeing that, but Yumasaki made matters worse by proudly displaying a picture on his home page. Togusa tried to run his friend over with the van for that one.

“I even placed a mosaic to blur out his license plate number and everything,” Yumasaki noted with absolute bafflement. Kadota’s resulting sigh was getting to be a bit much.

“You should have placed another mosaic on him driving the thing.”

Kadota asked himself for the umpteenth time why he was hanging out with these people. He cast his gaze forward to Sixtieth Floor Street.

There were young folks with bits of yellow on here and there, but Kadota did not feel any menace from them. He knew they were on the verge of beefing with the Dollars, but very few of them would recognize him, he decided.

Kadota and the two with him were members of the Dollars. The Dollars repped no color. The group was open to any and all, so while Kadota certainly fit the bill of a street gangster, Yumasaki and Karisawa completely destroyed that image.

Unlike the Yellow Scarves, they had no distinguishing features that identified their allegiance, so they had no fear of being attacked. Thus, they felt free to stroll openly through the town. However—

“Kadota,” someone called out to the group. “It’s been a while.”

“Huh? Oh...Kida,” Kadota said, recognizing the familiar face.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Kida.”

“Why aren’t you with the usual four-eyed girl and baby-faced kid today?”

Yumasaki and Karisawa’s tone was friendly, but Kadota gave the boy a stern glance, sensing something slightly more dangerous in Masaomi’s smile.

Then, noticing the yellow cloth wrapped around the boy’s knuckles, Kadota picked up on the situation. It was the darkest he felt all day, but this time he did not sigh.

“...Are you *back*?” he asked, his face hard.

Masaomi nodded after a brief pause. “Yes.”

“...I see,” Kadota noted simply.

Masaomi quietly got to the point. “No use standing out in the rain... Want to go somewhere, if you’ve got time to kill?”

Yumasaki and Karisawa shared a look, recognizing that this was not his usual flippant chattiness. Kadota glanced at the loitering boys with their yellow scraps. They hadn't noticed Masaomi's presence, but if they kept standing around here that would eventually change.

On the other hand, if they just walked into any old store...they might find themselves surrounded by yellow in a heartbeat, depending on what Masaomi wanted to talk about.

"Sure, if we go to Simon's place," Kadota said, jutting his chin toward the corner of a road that led off of Sixtieth Floor Street. It was a cramped alley full of bars and restaurants.

Masaomi looked a bit unhappy at hearing the foreign name—but he summoned up his resolve and took the lead in marching toward the alley.



Russia Sushi

"Hey, Kida, Kadota. Well-cahm."

A warm voice with a thick accent greeted them as they pushed through the colorful hanging curtain at the door. The interior of the business was an incongruous combination of Russian imperial palace and Japanese sushi counter.

While the counter was the same as any other sushi restaurant, the tatami mats of the floor were matched with marble walls in a truly clashing way. That, combined with the hanging sign promising HASSLE-FREE PRICING! ALL ITEMS MARKET VALUE! put any visitor into a skeptical state of mind.

That was the first impression every visitor to Russia Sushi received upon walking inside. The skepticism was only increased by the sight of the massive employee who stood nearly seven feet tall. He was Simon, a black Russian who spoke oddly accented Japanese.

The concept of a black Russian was unfamiliar to most Japanese, which got him plenty of funny looks, but everyone was convinced once they heard him chatting in fluent Russian with the white chef behind the counter.

His presence was the reason Kadota chose this place to talk.

Simon was the only person who could stop Shizuo Heiwajima, widely regarded

as the most dangerous man in Ikebukuro—and a frequent visitor to Russia Sushi himself. Starting a fight here meant causing trouble with two of the most violent men in town. By passing through the doorway of this restaurant, Kadota figured no Yellow Scarves would want to get involved.

For his part, Masaomi was on good terms with the group, so they didn't distrust him too much—but there was no guarantee that the other Yellow Scarves didn't have their own ideas.

Kadota felt that it was worth having a good talk with Masaomi, so he chose the safest location he could think of nearby.

"Yo, odd combination of faces," said the white man behind the counter, who was cutting up the pieces of fish for delivery orders with an assortment of knives. Unlike Simon, he was fluent in Japanese, but after his greeting he resumed his work in silence.

"Cheap sushi, very good. I give you good deal, Boss Kadota."

"Boss of who? Four of your cheapest nigiri combinations. We'll sit in the back."

"Right away," signaled the white chef, and Simon beamed as he guided the four to the back compartment.

"So what do you want with us? Bein' the head of the Yellow Scarves...whether former or not, I don't know or care," Kadota started up immediately, as soon as Simon had dropped the napkins and left to get their tea. "It's about the Dollars, I assume. I know what's going on with both sides at this point in time, and me and Yumasaki's names are listed on the Dollars' website."

"I appreciate you getting right to the point. Then, I suppose you know what I want to ask."

"Let me be clear: We dunno all the details about the whole organization. Some of our people got done by the slasher, too. I dunno how much power you have now, Kida, but it'd be real helpful if you could clear that up on your side."

"Well..."

Before Masaomi could continue, Simon came by with four teacups. They were relatively large cups, but they looked small when carried by the enormous man.

He picked up the steaming hot cups with his entire palm and rhythmically presented them to the group.

“You drink tea, get your catechins,” Simon said with a thumbs-up.

Kadota smirked and reached for a cup. “Yeow!” he shrieked, dropping the cup back on the table.

Simon quickly offered him a napkin and apologized. “Oh, I sorry. Don’t worry, Boss Kadota. You meditate and clear mind, fire become cold. No get angry, you get hot.”

“I think you actually know a lot more Japanese than you let on... I’m amazed you can hold these cups without getting burned.”

“?”

Simon responded to Kadota’s admiration with a confused, uncomprehending smile. Masaomi looked at his thick, scarred palms and swallowed hard.

“Enjoy, ya?” Simon said, still smiling as he left.

Masaomi finally continued what he had been about to say. “...Well...it might only be your personal group that thinks there’s no connection to the slasher.”

“Huh?”

“The Dollars are a team of equals without any hierarchy, right? So it’s quite possible that there’s a faction that was responsible for the slashings outside of your knowledge. Plus, if they made sure to include a few Dollars in the attacks, that would move suspicion away from the Dollars.”

“...”

Kadota mulled over Masaomi’s words in his head and eventually took a brief sip of hot tea. “I see. Well, you’ve got a point there.”

Next to Masaomi was Yumasaki and facing him next to Kadota was Karisawa, but the two were uncharacteristically quiet.

A brief silence passed, then Kadota took another sip and murmured, “So what’s the motive?”

“...”

“Why would a group with no reason to make a name for itself and no monetary dealings decide to attack people indiscriminately and get rid of the Yellow Scarves?”

“If I knew that, things would be a lot easier. It could be a personal grudge of some kind,” Masaomi muttered hesitantly, but that only brought Kadota after him harder.

“Personal? I’ve never heard of any beef between the Yellow Scarves and Dollars.”

“Not the Dollars.”

“...”

Kadota realized what Masaomi was insinuating. His face went hard and he clammed up.

Masaomi spat the name out, clearly not wanting to even touch the subject. “The Blue Squares.”

A furrow appeared between Kadota’s brows the instant he heard the title. “Kida...”

“I haven’t forgotten what that team did to us. That drove me away from the gang, and things settled down eventually...but the hatred never left. That’s my suspicion.”

“And so you’ve come to me.”

Kadota held his silence for a while as he thought, but Masaomi didn’t wait for an answer. “You understand, don’t you, Kadota? Tell me who the Dollars’ boss is. And if possible...tell me which of your *old friends* from the Blue Squares are in the Dolla—”

Crakk.

A dry sound cut Masaomi off.

He looked over to see Yumasaki, wearing his usual expression, pulling apart a pair of wooden chopsticks.

“Come on, Kida,” he said, handling the sharp wooden implement. “You

shouldn't mix fantasy and reality."

In a way, it was almost the very last thing one would expect the half-Japanese otaku to say. Over time, the smile faded from his face.

"The Blue Squares never existed. Isn't that good enough?"

Just as the sentence ended, Masaomi smacked his palm on the table. The cups of tea shifted, the liquid within them swaying.

"But Saki—! You're going to tell me that Saki was sent to the hospital by some people who don't even exi—"

Wham.

Again, a sound cut Masaomi off.

Between the gaps of his fingers, pressed against the table, the cleanly pointed ends of the chopsticks were bent.

For an instant, Masaomi didn't understand what had happened—until he realized that Yumasaki had slammed the points of the chopsticks in his hands into the table right between his fingers. He held his breath.

For having just thrashed the tiny pieces of wood to pulp, Yumasaki's expression, while not smiling, did not seem very angry, either.

He was expressionless.

The force was enough that if they'd landed on the back of his hand, they might have punctured all the way through his palm. Something cold ran down Masaomi's back, but he did not pull his hand away.

Karisawa spoke in Yumasaki's place, her cheek resting on her hand in a pose of bored exasperation. "That's right. Your ex got beat up by people who don't exist. That's good enough."

"You don't wanna make me angry, Karisawa."

"You already are. Plus, Yumacchi got angry before you did. So that makes us even. You might be angry about what happened to your girlfriend, but others are going to be angry if you accuse Dotachin—in fact, the Dollars as a whole—of being the slasher. If you can't accept us as being even in that regard, then you

never should have brought it up in the first place.”

She paused for a moment to sip her tea, fixing the younger boy with a sharp look.

“While we didn’t carry out any of that, it’s true that we owe you a moral debt. But if you’re going to dredge up the past with Saki, when it was Dotachin who saved her while you *ran away*,” she said, staring at Masaomi with half-lidded eyes, “then maybe we need to force you to view that part of your past as a figment of your imagination.”

The response to her statement came not from Masaomi but Yumasaki, still clutching the broken chopsticks in the same position. “You’re wrong, Karisawa.”

“Huh? I am?”

“Even if the Blue Squares *did* exist, when *that part* happened, it was the Blue Squares who got attacked first. And yet he’s claiming we were the bad guys the entire time. I gotta dispute that point!”

“Oh, right. Man, I’m so embarrassed. I’m like in the super spiral of shame!”

As they carried on in their normal manner, Masaomi realized that he had lost the outlet for his anger—and lost his cool as well.

“...I’m sorry...about this,” he said, hesitantly hanging his head.

Yumasaki switched to his familiar smile, grinning away. “No, no, it’s my fault. I mean...I feel really bad about what happened with Saki.”

“No... I should be thanking you, not accusing you,” Masaomi said, his usually cool demeanor entirely gone.

Kadota, who had been silent all this time, had an unusually gentle expression on his face. “Even if you do hate me, I’m not gonna quibble... We did more than enough to a mere middle school kid to deserve that kind of hate.”

“But, Kadota, you didn’t—” Yumasaki started to protest, but Kadota cut him off with a glance.

Their leader spoke quietly and simply, but with a strength behind his words. “No matter how hard you try to deny it, you can’t escape what you were involved with.”

Masaomi's face began to waver. Something Izaya Orihara had said to him once came back to his mind.

"And with that in mind, let me say something... I don't know nothing about the boss, nor do I plan to go looking. And I will repeat: The slasher and the Dollars are unrelated. We have no reason to bicker with the Yellow Scarves," Kadota said, getting it all off his chest. Suddenly, he seemed to remember something. "Oh...actually, there is one person who knows the boss of the Dollars."

"Wh-who is that?!" Masaomi asked, leaning forward despite his best efforts to stay calm.

"Hang on... My point is, why would you even ask that? Let's say you get the boss's name out of that person. What will you do? Invite him out for tea and have a nice little chitchat? Or use your Yellow Scarves and stage an abduction?"

"I...I only want to track down the slasher. If the Dollars really are unrelated, I think it would be perfect just to talk it out."

"And is that the opinion of the Scarves as a whole?"

"..." Masaomi looked away from the pointed question.

"If it's like the old days, and you've got a tight grip on all of your people, then I can help you. But they changed while you stepped away from the Yellow Scarves. You can't tell me you haven't noticed," Kadota said forcefully, brooking no argument.

Masaomi listened with eyes shut tight and head down. He squeezed the words out of himself into groans. It was not the usual Masaomi with his self-absorbed, shallow gibberish, but a sympathetic, lonely boy pressured and at the end of his wits.

"I...I still think of them, of the Yellow Scarves, as my friends. But...it's true that I don't really want...to go back there permanently."

"I can imagine," Kadota said easily, draining the last of his tea. With the air in the room settled down a bit, he asked Masaomi, "You don't know what you should be doing, do you? You've found a different way of life. You don't know if anything you say will really reach them...and that's a big concern to you, isn't it?"

“...”

“Let’s just assume there really is a squabble with the Dollars. What does that even have to do with you? You left because you hated the idea of gang warfare...”

“I ran away,” Masaomi said, cutting himself down to size before Kadota could reach his point. But his eyes were slowly regaining the light, and the pathos that had racked him moments ago was easing.

“But this time...it’s not just my fellow Yellow Scarves.”

“Huh?”

“A good friend of mine from school was attacked by the slasher—someone who has nothing to do with the Yellow Scarves or the past. I can’t get over that... so I’m only using the Yellow Scarves name as an excuse to solve a personal problem,” Masaomi said, his voice full of strong will and intent, as Kadota listened. “Still, I want to know who the slasher is. That’s all this comes down to.”

“That’s all?”

“...Yes.”

“Then I’ll say no more on that. What I will say again, however...is that you won’t find the slasher in the Dollars,” Kadota repeated, another tiny sigh escaping his lips.

“I don’t—no—we don’t agree with that.”

“What?”

“Last night, we witnessed something beyond belief.”

Masaomi began to tell a story.

A story of the grotesque, otherworldly event he saw in the rain the night before.

And the undeniable truth that the “intruder” riding behind that creature carried a katana, and dozens of the Yellow Scarves witnessed the whole thing...

“...I see.”

Kadota held his cup, a look of troubled understanding on his face. When he

realized the cup was empty, he grimaced and put it back down.

“I’m aware of the rumors that the Black Rider’s participated in some Dollars meetups. The other Yellow Scarves know about it, too...”

“And the fact that she helped the girl with the katana get away means that the slasher and the Black Rider must be working with the Dollars, you’re claiming?” Kadota said, sussing out Masaomi’s point.

The other boy nodded gravely. “And a guy with us named Horada got attacked by the rider yesterday...”

“Horada? Horada...”

“?”

Masaomi was confused by the way Kadota repeated the name, but he was quickly distracted by the whispering of Yumasaki and Karisawa, who had been silent for the last several minutes.

“Hey, Yumacchi. Did you notice something strange about that story?”

“What’s that?”

“The Black Rider finished off the slasher, remember?”

“Well, it was mostly Shizuo. Plus Togusa running him over with the van.”

They were speaking quietly enough to avoid being overheard on the street, but not inside while seated directly next to other people.

“What was that?”

“Huh? Uh...well, um, just...how to explain?” Yumasaki stammered.

Kadota sighed and took it upon himself to do just that. “Are you aware that the slasher seems to be more than one person?”

“Well, there were fifty incidents that happened in a single night. So, yeah, that seems clear.”

Kadota seemed hesitant to say what was on his mind, but he quickly gave up. “Well...now that you’ve seen something beyond belief, you’ll be able to believe it.”

“What do you mean?”

“There won’t be any more slashings.” Kadota tapped the rim of his empty cup with a finger. When he spoke, it was slow, in rhythm with the beat. “From what I heard on the grapevine, the slasher chose to pick a fight with—of all people—that monster Shizuo Heiwajima... Do I need to explain what happened next?”

Shizuo Heiwajima.

The instant Masaomi heard the name, something crawled from his back over his face.

Masaomi knew him well—he was a human bomb, someone people called the fighting puppet of Ikebukuro.

The slasher’s mob versus one human being.

It was an unthinkable matchup, but there was only a single person who could grant it immediate credibility, and that was Shizuo.

“No...but... Who did it, then?” Masaomi asked in disbelief.

Kadota shook his head as he scratched it. “Well...whatever. If you just want to know about the slasher, then there’s no use hiding what I know. As for the rest... ask the person who knows the boss. I’ll leave the decision up to the two of them.”

“Uhm,” Masaomi mumbled, surprised that Kadota had broken so easily.

But at the same time, Kadota’s eyes narrowed, and he delivered a warning. “However, if that goes awry and you have to declare the Dollars your enemy—”

“If we do, then what?”

“I’ll be ready for that fight.”

The supposedly calmed air between them prickled once again.

“...”

“Is that all you have to say? You’re prepared for that outcome, too, aren’t you? When you fly the flag of vengeance, it becomes more than just the usual hell-raising kids your age like to get into. You know that, don’t you?”

“I—”

Once again, a sound stopped them at the height of the tension in the room.

Thunk.

With a pleasing sound, something embedded itself into the wall next to the table.

The group recognized that something had passed between them and turned their heads slowly toward it, anticipating what they would find.

What they saw sticking out of the wooden wall was a combination of silver and black.

“Gonna scare the other customers... Take that talk outside,” said the Russian behind the counter in his brusque Japanese, working the sushi in front of him without looking at them.

One of his sashimi knives was missing from its customary spot. It was now stuck into the wall between the four.

“All ready. One Kremlin roll, two, three, four, just for you, boss,” came Simon’s cheery voice, breaking right through the chilly atmosphere in the room. “You hungry because you fight. Eat sushi, get full, full of dreams. Human stomach is dream factory. So you stop fighting, yes?”

The waiter neatly carried over four dishes of the rolls they’d ordered, balancing the plates in both hands.

“Uh...yeah. Thanks, Simon.”

“I didn’t realize kitchen knives could sink so deeply into walls.”

“Doesn’t this count as attempted murder?”

“Th-thank you for this food.”

The combination of the chef’s menace and Simon’s easygoing charm having drained the tension out of the group, the four silently ate their sushi. The food was adeptly made and quite delicious, but with the desire to finish their food and get down to business lodged in their brains, they weren’t able to fully appreciate it.

“So long, Kida. Don’t get any half-cocked ideas.”

Kadota's group paid their tab and left the restaurant. Yumasaki and Karisawa launched back into their usual chatter, as though they'd completely forgotten everything discussed inside.

As his old acquaintances drifted away into the distance, Masaomi sat alone in the little tatami enclosure, holding his head in his hands.

"I'll be damned..."

Someone who had made contact with the boss of the Dollars. Someone whom Kadota had declined to name. But Masaomi recognized the number that Kadota left with him.

"So...I've finally come back to *him*."

He sat in silence for long moments, lost in the past. Masaomi was a statue. Minutes passed by.

"Ne rasstraivaysya." (Cheer up, man.)

The voice came from over his shoulder. Masaomi looked over to see Simon with a fresh plate in his hands. It bore a few pieces of sushi that were clearly a rank above what they'd ordered earlier.

"Huh?"

Before Masaomi could ask what this was about, the cranky chef from behind the counter answered it for him.

"Gloomy faces drive business away. So eat up and leave with a smile on your face."

"Oh...thank you," Masaomi said, inclining his head. When the chef didn't respond, Simon butted in with a cheery grin.

"You no fight. You already happy. Happy enough. So don't steal happy of others. You share, everyone happy. I just learn saying: 'White goose is loud, becomes round.' What this mean, anyway? Why goose? You are goose, Kida?"

"...It's 'What goes around comes around,'" muttered the chef. Simon looked quizzical, not understanding the difference.

Masaomi popped the freshly served sushi into his mouth as he listened. It

tasted like tuna collar dipped in soy sauce. When he bit into it, the fat practically melted on his tongue, mixing with the salty soy sauce in perfect harmony.

He was so surprised by the taste, which was beyond what he normally paid for, that Masaomi couldn't help but murmur, "Wow, this is good."

He thanked them for the food and was about to pay, but the chef told him, "They already paid for your share." He'd gotten a free meal.

Masaomi realized that despite his hostile attitude, everyone around him had noticed his obvious misery and had tried to cheer him up in their own ways. He couldn't help but snort.

Guess I'm still just a kid after all...

With his mind now made up, Masaomi left Russia Sushi, spurring his naive self onward toward fulfilling his purpose.



Outside of Tokyu Hands

By the early afternoon, the rain had eased up just slightly, but the wind was blowing the droplets under their umbrellas.

"Horada... Horada..."

Kadota continued mulling over the name they'd heard earlier, as the group made its way toward the Ikebukuro location of the Animate chain store.

"What'sat, Kadota? New kind of curse or something?"

"It sounds like a spell if you put a rhythm to it, like 'Ho-radaho-rada.' A spell of binding? For a summoning maybe."

"Shut up and stop confusing me," Kadota grumbled at the two muttering behind him. "Horada," he repeated.

"So what's up, Dotachin? You've been mulling this over for a while."

"Remember how he said that the Black Rider took down a Yellow Scarf named Horada?" Kadota said, looking pensive. He revealed what was on his mind, trying to answer his own question. "It's nothing serious, just... That's an uncommon name. Maybe the kanji characters are different...but something about this is

bugging me.”

“And what is that?”

“Well...I used to know a guy by that name.”

Kadota decided that letting his mind run in circles would be a waste of time, so he changed the topic. “Was that chef hard-core or what? One step in the wrong direction and someone would be a goner.”

“Sorry, I actually thought it was pretty cool.”

“Me, too. I can just imagine the scene: The hero of the cooking manga claims that he shouldn’t use a knife as a weapon, while the sushi chef busts out his combat sambo.”

“Ugh, you people and your inability to distinguish fantasy from reality!” Kadota groaned as he facepalmed and shook his head, more exasperated than angry.

Karisawa argued back, her eyes sparkling. “But you know, Dotachin, that chef’s actually quite a character. He was a hand-to-hand instructor in the Russian military, so I hear. And he also fought off some mafia types who came over from America.”

“There you go with your imagination again... Then again, putting the chef aside, Simon’s definitely got some serious strength and reflexes.”

“Oh, you bet. He can even stop Shizuo and Izaya from fighting. You think maybe he was the captain of some crazy mercenary band or something?! In order to avoid the notice of the state-sponsored assassins after his head, he takes on the role of a simple sushi chef!”

“Why would he start a restaurant called Russia Sushi if he wanted to avoid attention?” Kadota quipped. “But...I don’t mind, because the sushi’s good. I don’t care about their past.”

He watched a gang of yellow youths cross their path, then turned his head up to the sky and its endless rain.

The Sunshine building provided its own light to the sky around it, but there was still no sign that the rain would stop.

“In the end, the only one who can’t escape the past...is he himself.”



Masaomi returned to Sixtieth Floor Street with a renewed sense of purpose in his eyes.

The number Kadota gave him was still saved in his phone's contact list.

Yep...you just can't escape the past...

Izaya Orihara.

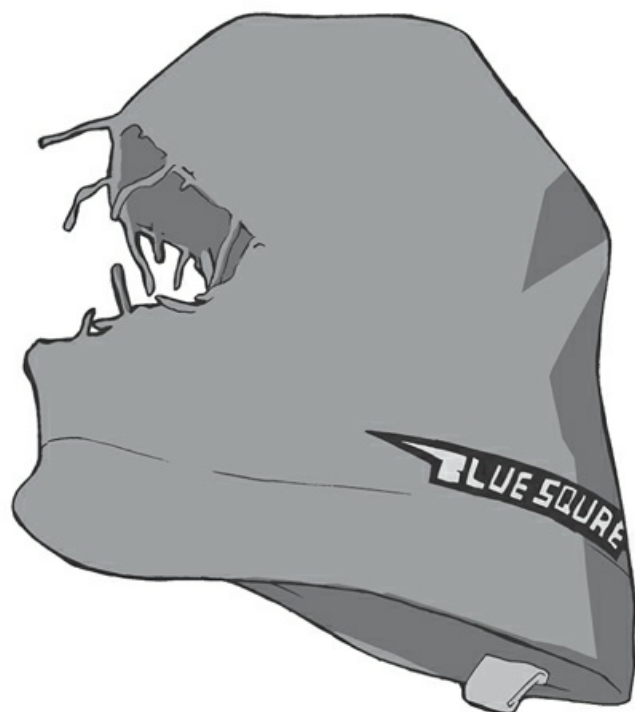
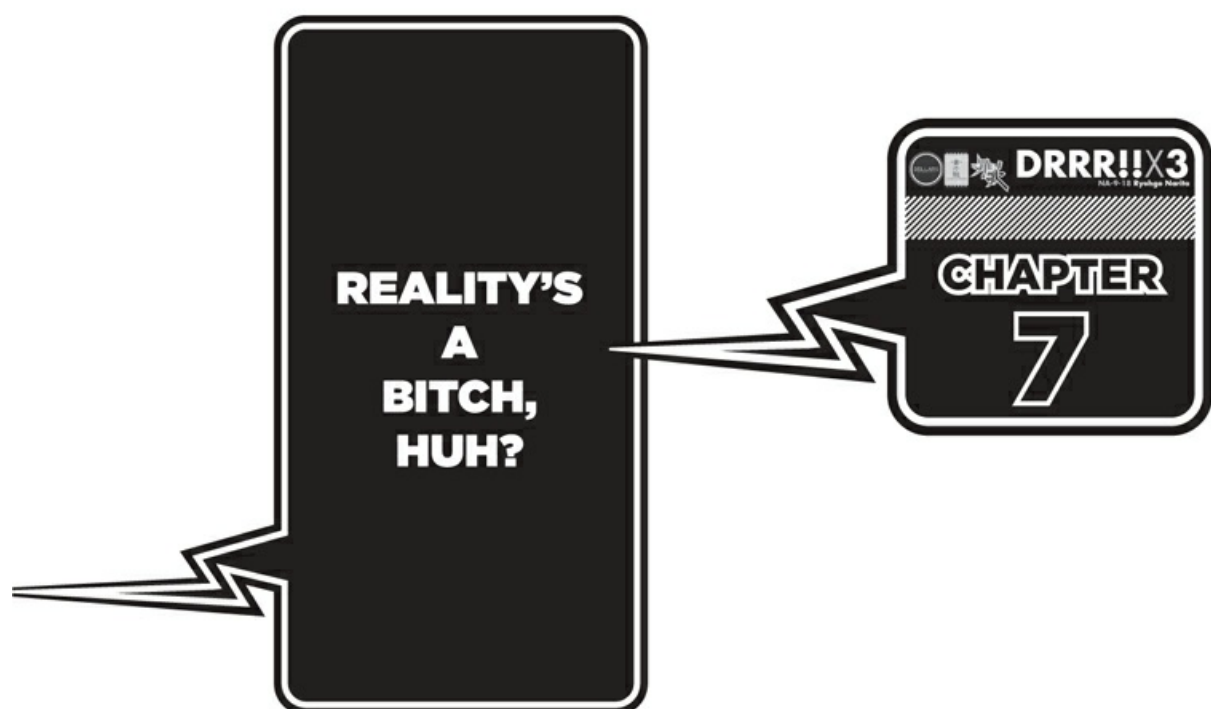
That was the name saved in his phone's address book. The number listed next to it matched the one that Kadota gave him.

Perhaps he hadn't bothered to say the name because he knew that Masaomi and Izaya had known each other for years.

Perhaps Kadota and the Izaya of years ago were right, and there was no escape from his past.

Masaomi's eyes followed the groups of young men in yellow that dotted the major street, but his mind had melted into the past.

It was time to face the things he'd been trying to escape from for so long.



Chapter 7: Reality's a Bitch, Huh?

Two years earlier

It was two fateful encounters that happened at the same moment.

At the same time that Masaomi met Saki Mikajima, he also happened across the information agent.

“Me? Let’s see... I’m kind of like a guardian of Saki’s. Don’t worry, I’m not her boyfriend. And badger games have gone out of style,” the man said, unsolicited.

When Saki came to see Masaomi at first, he was like a ghost following her around. He claimed to sell information from his base around Ikebukuro, but Masaomi didn’t have much interest in the man. Or to be honest, he didn’t *want* to hold any interest in him.

Contrary to his pleasant features, the man had a downright eerie atmosphere to him. The things he said put him at odds with society, but he was often frightfully insightful. That strange sense of being unmoored from the rest of the world must have been inspiring to those who wanted an escape from reality. So oddly enough, the man named Izaya Orihara found himself surrounded by a variety of people.

The girls who followed him around like a personal retinue were practically his own little cult. Saki was one of them. Whether serious or not, she showed Izaya the greatest respect and claimed that he was psychic.

If Masaomi was ever uncertain about anything, she would claim, “Just ask Izaya, and you’ll be fine,” even if it had nothing to do with the older man. The Yellow Scarves disliked the informant at first, but things did get much easier when they started following Izaya’s suggestions. The group slowly came around to him.

Except for Masaomi.

The first night he met her, Masaomi asked Saki, “If Izaya told you to kill yourself, would you do it?” After a few seconds of hesitation, she said, “I think I would.”

Wow, I feel really sorry for her.

Masaomi decided he ought to stay away from her—but it felt so good to bask in her obvious affection for him. Nowadays, after he’d grown older and known many other girls, he would have felt danger in her eerie nature and kept her at bay.

But back then, Masaomi didn’t have that personal defense. He kept meeting Saki.

He felt that somehow he could break her free of Izaya’s chains.

Izaya wasn’t bilking Saki out of money or making her his slave, but it was clear to see that her reverence for him was abnormal.

And Saki—obsession with Izaya aside, an adorable and ordinary girl—was absolutely one of the most desirable women that Masaomi had ever met, in both personality and looks.

If he could just fix that one flaw, they could have a perfectly normal relationship. It was with this calculation in mind that Masaomi spent time around the city with the girl.

About a month after they’d first met, Masaomi had a rare opportunity to be alone with Saki. He nonchalantly asked, “Would you say the two of us are going out?”

“What do you think?” Saki countered, chuckling.

Masaomi continued, “Listen, why are you even with me?”

“Umm, because I like you?” she replied, matter-of-fact.

Masaomi raised an eyebrow. “Did that Izaya guy tell you to like me?”

“Mmm, only at the start. Izaya doesn’t really interfere much in romance.”

“Then why do you still like me?”

“Because you’re cool. Mm, no—because you’re cute, I guess.”

He couldn't tell if she was joking or not. Saki turned the question on him. "And Masaomi? Do you like me?"

"If you stop fanatically worshipping that Izaya guy, I might decide I like you."

He figured that this would make her mad, but Saki only giggled and owned up to it. "I can't help it. I'd appreciate it if you could just overlook that one little flaw I have."

"...So you know it's a flaw?"

"Yeah. I just don't want to fix it."

What's up with her?

Masaomi felt like he understood her even less than before. He had no idea how to respond. But his mouth had a simple message that it delivered on its own.

"If it's a flaw, then fix it." It was as close to a confession of his affection as he'd ever given. "I'm here... I'll help you get over it."

From that point on, Masaomi and Saki were a couple.

Masaomi stopped hitting on girls altogether, and everyone who knew him was more than a little shocked that he'd been tied down to a single girl.

But no one blamed him for his choice. The Yellow Scarves had more pressing concerns than the love life of their leader.

It was the Blue Squares.

They were a street gang that staked their turf in Ikebukuro, just like the Yellow Scarves, but they differed in that they had a wider range of ages and a greater inclination toward violence.

It started when the Blue Squares saw the signature yellow cloths and decided to pick a fight, arguing over "territory."

And they'd accepted that fight.

Masaomi thought it was just another situation like any other. But it wasn't.

This enemy's numbers and style of fighting were completely unlike anything they'd faced before.

When they approached, they went to great lengths to hide themselves and only attacked when they were certain they had the advantage in numbers. There was no attempt to justify their attacks. They only picked fights they knew they would win, methodically and mechanically.

The gang of over a hundred was picked off one by one, and fear rapidly spread through the group. Masaomi was frightened as well at encountering a completely different kind of foe, but without experience in leading organized battles, he wasn't able to respond with the same strategy. Neither was he able to remove their yellow signifiers and break up the gang.

The majority of his comrades were sick of being taken down. But even stronger than that anger was Masaomi's fear.

He was afraid of breaking up the Yellow Scarves and losing the place that he'd finally carved out for himself. At the same time, he felt like he would be losing everything he'd gained as a member of the Yellow Scarves.

When he looked at the girl who was first and foremost on that list, she wore her typical smile and said something meant to comfort him.

"You should just ask Izaya what to do."

Masaomi's memory was fuzzy when it came to exactly how he got involved with Izaya.

The only impression he still had was walking into Izaya's apartment somewhere in Ikebukuro and seeing Izaya throw his arms wide with an ostentatious "Welcome!"

In retrospect, it wasn't a "welcome" to his home. He was welcoming Masaomi to his side of the city—the seedy underbelly. But Masaomi didn't realize this at the time. He just wanted to use Izaya's information to help his team win.

He believed this was the right choice without an ounce of hesitation. Later, Masaomi would reflect upon his choices at the time and see himself as being drunk on his own power. He was drunk on himself, waving the sake of his companions around like a get-out-of-jail-free card.

But part of him had to be uneasy about it. He did not tell his old friend back home about these events in their chat room. In fact, he was chatting with his

friend less and less often.

“After all, it’s much healthier to have a personal relationship face-to-face, rather than through mere words on a screen,” the experts on TV would say when discussing Internet addiction or crimes committed as a result of such issues. Masaomi used that very logic as an excuse to cut down on his Internet time.

The Internet eats away at your mind, he told himself, as he moved away from the bracing, refreshing one-on-one fights lionized in comic books and plunged further into a deep, dark war.

Izaya’s knowledge dramatically changed the Yellow Scarves.

He offered them not just the Blue Squares’ hideouts, but their methods of fighting as well. Bit by bit, they turned the town back to yellow, the way it had been before.

At first, Masaomi was alarmed at the way Izaya strategically manipulated the Yellow Scarves. But that alarm was soon forgotten, replaced by a different emotion—one that Masaomi had never been able to indulge in before.

“We can win.”

The next thing he knew, Masaomi was smiling with absolute certainty in their triumph.

He had already forgotten that winning fights wasn’t the reason he was doing this.

He forgot the face of his old friend, banishing him and the sights of his country home to oblivion. All he experienced was one long bask in the glory of victory.

Until he got the call that Saki Mikajima had been abducted by the Blue Squares’ van.



It was on a night when the Yellow Scarves were truly beginning to dominate their foe. Masaomi’s phone rang out of the blue.

The screen said that it was from Kijimura, one of the lieutenants of the Yellow Scarves, so he answered it without hesitation.

“Is this Masaomi Kiiidaaa?”

The voice that came out of the speaker was unfamiliar, insistent and unpleasant.

“...Who is this? It’s not Kijimura, is it?”

“Nice—to—meet—you. This is Izumii, leader of the Blue Squares, at your service.”

“...!”

Masaomi’s entire body began to tremble. His mouth worked soundlessly, while the man on the other side smeared the raw reality of his sticky voice into Masaomi’s eardrums.

“We’re having a quiz show tonight.”

“Hey, wait a second... What happened to Kijimura?!”

“Here’s your question: ding-ding! Kijimura’s already been sent to the hospital. Instead, we have a very special guest with us. Can you guess who? Here’s a hint! It’s someone very, very, verrry important to you—you—you—you...”

The instant his last sentence finished, Masaomi’s body stopped trembling and broke into a chilling sweat. His every pore screamed. He could barely squeeze the breath out of his lungs.

“Hey...”

“Tick, tick, tick. *Bzzt!* Time’s up. But I’ll cut you some slack. You did think of someone very specific, didn’t you? In that case, ding-ding-ding! You’re correct!”

“No, not Saki! What did you do with Saki?!” Masaomi raged.

The voice continued, unperturbed. “Question number two!”

“Shut the hell up! Saki has nothing to do with anything!”

“What do you think your dear girlfriend looks like right about now?”

“...!”

“Well, I’ll leave you hanging on that one until you can see for yourself. But question three is the bonus round! There we go...”

A moment later came the sound of something hard breaking. A familiar voice

shot into Masaomi's brain as a scream.

"Now, that was the sound of *which* bone breaking? Here's your hint: She probably won't be walking for a while."

"——!"

Masaomi raged with a silent scream. The man on the other side of the receiver—the leader of the Blue Squares known as Izumii—abandoned his jovial tone and went heavy and dark, the words stabbing like knives.

"Now for your final question... If you don't come to the following location, all alone, in the next twenty minutes... Or alternately, if you decide to alert the police..."

"...then what will happen to this lovely young lady...?"



Several minutes later, Ikebukuro

"Whaddaya say, Kadota? You really oughta swing by," cackled a young man in a blue hat, a carbonated beverage in his hand.

His conversation partner, himself wearing a knit cap colored blue, had a sharp gleam to his eyes. He leaned back against the side of the van, looking unconvinced.

"Where to?"

"You know, him. The guy. Yellow Scarves. We're gonna go destroy their leader."

"I told you, I'm not into this latest fight. First of all, I thought this guy was supposed to be cautious. It would be one thing if we were in the country, but invading his house in Ikebukuro? The cops will be raiding us before we're even done with the guy," said Kadota.

The young man in the blue hat grinned wickedly. "Nah, I'm telling you, Izumii abducted his girlfriend."

"...Huh?"

"She's just a kid, really, but pretty cute. I figured she'd be like a club girl, but I

guess she's more of a rich girl. Exciting, right? It'll be plenty of fun, even if Kida never shows up."

"...Oh, you kidnapped her."

Kadota looked up at the sky for a bit as he thought it over. Eventually he smiled and clapped a hand on the shoulder of the man across from him. "I see... In that case, I'm going."

"Right? You gotta get in on this!"

"Tell Izumii something for me when you wake up."

"Eh?"

What did he mean by "wake up"? the young man in the blue hat couldn't help but wonder.

"Tell him... 'Later, you piece of shit.'"

Kadota's forehead smashed into the bridge of his nose.

"Hey, guys... You wanna take a trip somewhere far off? Like, go to an *onsen* hot spring or something," Kadota suggested to his companions inside the van as he climbed through the door.

"Whuh?"

"What's up, Kadota?"

Yumasaki and the others glanced dumbly back and forth between their unconscious crewmate outside and the enlightened look on Kadota's face.

"What I'm saying is...you wanna go on a vacation or something, *until the tempers cool down*?" Kadota said enigmatically.

Karisawa had been listening to their conversation from her window seat, and she snickered now. "Rather than run for safety, why don't we just *not inflame the tempers further*?"

"Look...I'm not saying I necessarily think it's the right thing to do."

And then, Kadota explained to the rest what he was thinking of doing, as matter-of-fact as if he were planning out a picnic.

They would betray their team, the Blue Squares, and rescue the girl from the dozen or so members who had kidnapped her.

“I’m not going to force the rest of you into the plan, and I ain’t dumb enough to play heroic and go on my own... I’ll let you decide.”

The other people in the car all smirked together.

“Look, we’re following you. We have no attachment to the Blue Squares.”

“To be honest, I actually hated Izumii and his little brownnoser Horada.”

“We taking my van? I’m not gonna complain.”

“If we’re going to a different city, I’m going to request somewhere with an Animate, a Toranoana, and a Manga no Mori location.”

“I agree with the above.”

With the group unanimous, Kadota smiled to himself. He pulled off the blue cap he’d been wearing and tossed it into the van’s trash can.

“Aw, man. It would have been so much cooler if you’d thrown that hat out the window,” Yumasaki grumbled.



Kadota grinned impishly. “Nah... I make it a point to keep the town clean.”



After the call finished, Masaomi stood stock-still, clutching his phone.

He decided he must be stuck in a dream—and prayed.

Prayed, prayed, prayed.

All he could do was pray.

He couldn’t take a step. He couldn’t take the phone from his ear. Time slowly slipped away, moment by moment.

How many seconds did it take before he was able to accept it as reality?

Masaomi wondered why he didn’t rush out the instant he heard about Saki to go save her.

No, wait. I can’t save Saki by acting rashly. That’s just what they want. Gotta be cool... Be cool, Masaomi... Ah...aah, aaaaaaaa...

“Aaaaaaaaaa

“Aaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaa

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Masaomi wailed and slammed his phone to the floor.

How was he still stuck in place, making excuses for himself?

I’m so worried about her. Saki, Saki—I need to save Saki.

Saki, Saki, Saki!

The memories of her flooded his brain.

All those countless smiles that Saki had given him had been mercilessly crushed by the scream through the phone.

But still...his legs wouldn’t move.

It was that unease he always felt.

The smoldering little spark had finally evolved into outright fear that was now assaulting him. But he had never anticipated that it would be this terrible.

He always thought that what he did was just an extension of the silly fights that kids had.

That no matter what happened, they were still just middle schoolers.

Subconsciously, he always imagined that he would get a free do-over.

That mental rule was predicated upon the assumption that his opponents would understand. And thus, he had never imagined a situation like this.

But to be accurate, he *had* anticipated this, just after their gang war started. But when they began to turn the tide of battle, the sheer catharsis of victory swept away even that natural anxiety into the back of his mind.

And now he was faced with undeniable reality.

Agonizingly aware of every single second, Masaomi frantically searched for a plan. But he couldn't put anything into motion. No matter his ideas, he couldn't escape the unease of not knowing what would result.

"Ahh, dammit... What am I doing?!"

He slammed his forehead and fists into the wall. Suddenly, he reached an idea.

Izaya might know.

He no longer had any hesitation about the idea. Just like the girls who had formed Izaya's personal retinue, just like Saki, Masaomi would hang on every word that came out of the shady informant's mouth.

He quickly scooped up the phone he'd slammed onto the floor and checked the screen, silently praying. Thanking his lucky stars that the display was tough enough to still work, Masaomi flipped through his history until he reached Izaya's number.

But the only thing that greeted him was the repetition of the call tone. No one was picking up.

Pick up. Come on...pick up the phone!

"I'm sorry, I cannot answer your—"

He hung up as soon as the answering machine started and redialed the same number.

Over and over and over.

More time passed.

Masaomi felt urged by some unseen pressure to go outside. He started racing for the parking garage they'd told him about over the phone. All the while, he had the phone pressed to his ear, calling Izaya over and over.

But the phone did nothing except announce his acquaintance's absence. It only fanned the flames of Masaomi's panic.

As he raced through the town, his mind writhed at the brink of despair.

Saki's smile. Her scream.

The sound of breaking bone.

I have to go.

I have to go...right to the people who made Saki scream like that... and kill every last one of them!

At the very moment he channeled this powerful determination, the parking garage came into sight in the distance.

He saw a van drive into the entrance—and through the gaps in the walls, a number of young men wearing blue...

His feet stopped.

The instant he saw the gang of blue, Masaomi's will instantly crumbled to dust.

He felt the chill of the air around him and was fully reminded that he was just a single teenager in middle school, completely helpless in the world.

His immobile legs had just reminded him of his own cowardice.

Why...why am I so afraid?

Saki's in danger...yet I can't even move my feet!

Why am I so afraid? This is for Saki's sake... I thought I would do anything for her! That shouldn't...have changed...!

Move, move, move!

He pounded his legs, willing them to proceed.

The trembling eventually turned to nausea, and he crumpled to his knees on the asphalt.

On the screen of his cell phone, the clock mercilessly displayed the time—the end of the countdown.

Already, he could not remember Saki's smile.



Parking garage, Ikebukuro

In a standing parking garage a short distance away from the shopping district.

Tucked away in the corner was a large van even bigger than Kadota's, surrounded by a number of men.

On the inside of the van, behind the tinted windows, a number of menacing men loomed over a prone young woman.

"I think the chick passed out, Izumii."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. That ain't no fun. We only broke her leg in a few places so far. I was hoping to get more screams outta her from what we're gonna do *next*."

A man with several missing teeth sighed. The breath escaped through the gaps in a high-pitched whistle that sounded oddly like a scream.

"Whatever. But it's already been over twenty minutes. Do we need to send this one into overtime for Masaomi Kida?"

The time limit had passed five minutes earlier, and the boy was nowhere to be found.

"Maybe he pussied out and ran? He's still just a kid, ya know? Even a full-grown man can't handle this."

"If he doesn't show, that's fine with me. Let's start the filming now, so help strip her... No, wait, I'd rather have her awake. That's more exciting. Hey, wake her up somehow. No one's gonna buy footage of an unconscious woman," Izumii said, his matter-of-fact tone at odds with the horrific brutality of his comments. His companions cackled and turned their gazes on the girl lying in the corner of the van.

“I don’t think that’s possible. She’s unconscious, not sleeping. I mean...you think she might die? Not that I care.”

“Nah, she’s fine, right? She’s not bleeding,” Izumii grunted, laughing. The others joined his laughter obediently.

Their laughter was answered by the side door of the van slamming open.

For an instant, they thought it was the leader of the Yellow Scarves, but if that had been the case, the members outside would have warned them.

It was someone else who greeted the nervous figures in the van.

“Heyaaa! Oh my God, you really did kidnap her.”

“...Oh, it’s you, Yumasaki.”

Izumii and his cohorts breathed a sigh of relief when they recognized the half-Japanese young man. “I didn’t expect you to show up. Where’s Kadota?”

“Yeah, I thought you didn’t go for real women.”

“Gonna put some kind of anime mask on her?”

“Bwa-ha! So creepy!”

It was clear from their comments that they didn’t think much of Yumasaki, but they didn’t go out of their way to antagonize him any further than that. After all, Yumasaki worked beneath Kadota, a powerful figure in the group, and it was well-known among the Blue Squares that Yumasaki himself was mentally unstable.

“So that’s her, huh? The poor little princess?” Yumasaki murmured uneasily, looking at the unconscious girl, her leg red, swollen, and tilted at an unnatural angle. “And this is how in reality, unlike in movies and manga, girls are terrorized and assaulted, with no heroes to the rescue. Reality’s a bitch, huh?”

Yumasaki cackled and spread his arms theatrically. “So here’s what I think.”

“What?”

“If a hero shows up right now to save her, the world will turn to two dimensions, and then I can save a fantasy realm with my new magical powers, and I’ll get all flirty with the girls, which leads to *ahem-hem-hem*... Anyway, time

to reach out for those dreams!”

The others in the van looked at one another in complete bafflement at the nonsensical string of spell words Yumasaki was putting together.

The Blue Squares grumbled, “God, you’re such a creepy weirdo. Anyway, our hero in this case decided to run off to save his own skin, so stop waiting for Kida and...”

“Ta-da-da-dahh!”

Yumasaki was already absent from the three-dimensional world.

“Here’s the new plan to turn reality into a heroic 2-D story with a happy ending! Bask in the blessing of the new hero’s attack! *Hurray!*”

“Wha—?”

The next moment, they saw Yumasaki pull two glass bottles out of nowhere and hurl them into the van.

The next moment after *that*, they caught the whiff of oil from the flying bottles.

“Wha...?”

Yumasaki ignored the look of shock on the others’ faces as he pulled a lighter out of his pocket and flicked it.

The men screamed and leaped out of the van, its interior glowing with blue flame. They rolled around on the parking garage concrete, trying to bat out the fire licking at the ends of their clothes.

The last person to jump from the vehicle was Yumasaki, carrying the prone girl. Some of the flaming oil had caught on his leg as well, but he did not stop until he reached the other van parked nearby.

“Get in!” Kadota shouted as he slid the door open. Yumasaki plunged through.

The other young men standing around just watched Kadota’s van, unsure of what was happening at first. Within a few seconds, some had picked up on the situation, and the officers who had finished stamping out their flames bellowed.

“Kadota! You sons of bitches!”

“After them! Get the car moving!”

“The car’s on fire!”

“Then put it out, dammit!”

Amid the chaos, Kadota’s van peeled out of the garage.

It never returned to their side.

Once safely out of the parking garage, they laid the injured girl down in the van as they headed for the hospital.

“You said you were just going by to take a look...”

“Well, she wasn’t tied down or anything, so...sooner the better! Totally set a new speed-run record on that one,” Yumasaki giggled to himself. Meanwhile, Karisawa and the others tended to the girl.

“I don’t think we should try moving her. She needs to get to the hospital right away,” Karisawa said, placing a blanket over Saki.

Togusa looked over from the driver’s seat. “Hey, is that...the kid from the Yellow Scarves, right?”

Kadota looked up and through the windshield to see a familiar boy kneeling over on the asphalt.

“I guess he did make it here...and then his legs failed him.”

“Well, I don’t blame him...”

“What should we do, Kadota? Pick him up?”

“It’s not like we’re doing this to get in with the Yellow Scarves. Plus, with the state she’s in, I doubt he’d believe us if we told him we saved her.”

The van drove past the boy and disappeared into the night. Along the way, they passed several police cars, likely drawn to the garage by some kind of report. Kadota watched their red shining lights, gloom in his eyes.

“Let’s just hope this is the end of everything.”

After that, Kadota’s group left Ikebukuro behind—but they wound up back there before long.

There were three reasons for this.

One, after the gang war calmed down, Saki's testimony to the police resulted in the arrest of Izumii and his group.

Two, the Blue Squares immediately caught the notice of the "professional" gentlemen in the Awakusu-kai, right around the same time they picked a fight with Shizuo Heiwajima. This led to their forced disbandment. Incidentally, during this uproar, Izaya tricked Shizuo into getting arrested, and he moved to Shinjuku immediately afterward.

And third, because they learned of the existence of a new group on the Internet.

A strange, different group called the Dollars.



Several weeks later, Raira General Hospital

Saki opened her eyes.

And yet, two weeks after hearing about it, Masaomi still hadn't visited her.

Once again, he came to the hospital but couldn't bring himself to walk through the doors.

His legs naturally went dead as he approached, the same way they had before.

Can't do it. Forget this.

He turned on his heel to leave but was interrupted by an unfamiliar voice.

"Hey."

"Huh...?"

"You're the guy from the Yellow Scarves... Kida, right?"

He turned around and saw a man wearing a black beanie, as well as a strange boy and girl hanging behind him.

"Um...who are you?"

"Uh...how to explain? First of all, I'm Kadota," he said, his face wry.

Masaomi came to a sudden realization. "Oh, from the Blue Squares?"

“You know me? You...aren’t gonna attack me?”

“I heard from Izaya that you betrayed your friends and rescued Saki. Um...thank you.”

Masaomi bowed deeply to the trio, clearly feeling conflicted. Kadota was momentarily taken aback by the boy’s politeness. When he found his voice, he said, “Look, we’re just leaving from a visit to see her. She says you haven’t gone yet?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“You’re not in any position to tell us what rights we have here. Listen, we’re only here because she asked.”

“Huh...?”

Masaomi looked up. Kadota jabbed a thumb back at the hospital building. “You can see this spot from her window.”

“...!”

“She asked us to send a message to you.”

Masaomi went pale.

“...‘Thanks for always coming,’ she says.”

“...!”

Masaomi froze on the spot.

Even after a long silence, he was rooted to the ground.

Kadota watched him for reactions, then eventually sighed and continued, “We told her that you ran full speed to reach her, and it was only a blockade of Blue Squares that kept you from being in time...rather than the truth.”

“?! ”

“And she didn’t decide she hated you for *not making it in time*. See ya.”

Kadota started to walk off, but within a step or two, Masaomi bit into him. “Why...why would you say that?! When did I ask you to do that?!”

“You never asked me to do anything. I’ve seen you in town a few times here

and there, but today's the first time we've ever talked. And even if you asked me to do something, I wouldn't listen. You could have asked me not to, and I'd tell her exactly the same thing."

There was power in his cold gaze. Masaomi lowered his face toward the ground, pushing his anger inward. He grumbled, "You know what happened. I...I ran away. My legs gave out. I couldn't move."

"Yeah, I know. And you're still running away from her now," Kadota replied, daring Masaomi to deny it, but the younger boy did not show any outward signs of anger.

"You...you want me to lie to her? After I completely abandoned her?!" Masaomi asked, pleading with Kadota. The other man grabbed him by the collar and yanked him upward.

"Get your head outta your ass," Kadota grunted with just the slightest note of irritation. At a distance, it looked like an older ruffian shaking down a helpless middle schooler for money, but Karisawa and Yumasaki did not budge from their spots.

"I wouldn't like it if you clicked your heels and said, 'Aw, gee, thanks. Lucky me!' But I don't like your current attitude much, either."

Masaomi clammed up, while Kadota continued his lecture. "You don't want her to hate you, but you ditched her. But you don't want to lie to her. And you still feel guilty about that. You're like a kid who gets caught shoplifting and says, 'I'm really, really sorry, just don't tell the police or my family.'"

"..."

"If you really feel guilty about leaving her there, then you should bear the discomfort of lying to her for the rest of your life. That's how you can repay what you owe her. And if you don't want to be dishonest to her...then stop running and say it to her face."

Finally, Kadota dredged up the past—but in a different way than Izaya had.

"I'll forgive you for running from the past." He let go of Masaomi's collar, and as he turned away, he left a parting comment. "But at least...stop running from the present and future."

Just as Kadota turned his back on Masaomi, the image of his perfect exit was ruined by the inconsiderate comments of his companions.

“Ohh? Kadota’s dropping some really cool lines over here!”

“Awesome! From now on, we ought to call Dotachin ‘Poet Poe-tan’!”

He stiffened and turned back toward them. “You...you heard that?!”

Kadota turned beet red. Karisawa and Yumasaki looked quite proud of themselves.

“Fweh-heh-heh! I bet you thought it was for his ears only, but that’s pointless against our hearing. Don’t you know we grew up watching late-night anime at super-low volume to avoid the family’s notice?”

“It’s pointless to stop us! Pointless-pointless-pointless-pointless-pointless-pointless!”

“Just use headphones!” Kadota snapped back weakly, rather flustered.

Yumasaki only irritated him further by honestly answering his pointless suggestion with, “Then we won’t hear our parents coming toward the room!”

“Just shut up!”

Masaomi watched the three squalling friends walk off, then turned back to the hospital.

Finally, his leaden legs took him a few hesitant steps forward.

Toward the hospital room of the girl he still loved...

So that he could tell her they were breaking up.



That night, for the first time in ages, Masaomi reached out to his old friend and invited him to the chat room. Seeing how much fun his friend was having talking to him again, Masaomi naturally felt his frayed nerves growing calmer.

But the peace he felt only put his loss into sharper relief.

What could he do to fill it? Could he bury that empty space by falling in love with a different girl? These thoughts swirled in the back of Masaomi’s head as he chatted. Meanwhile, his old friend shifted gears to a new topic of discussion.

“So I guess we have our big school exams this year. Do you know what high school you want to go to?”

Masaomi imagined the innocent, friendly face of the boy on the other side of the screen, and his answer came naturally.

“I’m going to test for Raira Academy. It’s nice and close.”

He really had no interest in high school plans, but for this moment, he found himself praising the school he would likely attend, playing up its many attractions.

He finished by typing, *“You should come, too.”*

A year later.

Masaomi reunited with Mikado and met Anri, a girl who was mysteriously aloof from the rest of the world.

At first, he got along with Anri, using her to tease his old friend and push him along. But as time passed, he realized that she meant something to him, too. Was it the same emotion he felt toward Saki? Was it the same as the emotion he felt toward other girls?

Another year with these thoughts passed...

He found out that Anri Sonohara was attacked by the slasher.

And then he was right back where he started.

He himself had proved Izaya Orihara’s words correct.

Masaomi found himself visiting Saki again.

We return to the present.



Chapter 8: Broken Windows Theory

Shinjuku

The luxury apartment building sat on the corner of a crowded street.

The throngs that stuffed the nighttime street each had their own pace and their own destination, but almost none of them actually stopped still in the street.

Looking up provided a glimpse of the Tokyo government office and other high-rise buildings, but this particular street was full of a different atmosphere from the business sector and the shopping districts outside of the train station.

A young man sighed as he looked down gloomily at the city below.

“It’s so boring. It truly is tremendously boring not having anything to do. I thought I might do some people watching out the window, but I don’t see anyone I find interesting.”

The young man, Izaya Orihara, surveyed the view outside the window as though watching a scene in a movie. He sighed again.

“Have you considered doing your job?” offered a clinical voice from behind the mournful young man. Standing in stark contrast to Izaya, who was idly gazing out the window, the young lady briskly and efficiently moved around the information agent’s office performing assistant duties—Namie Yagiri.

She appeared to be his age or perhaps slightly older. He held out his arms theatrically and proclaimed, “But you’re doing all of the tasks that I would otherwise be doing. It’s so boring.”

“...Can I hit you?”

“You may not. And why do you care? You’re getting paid for this. Not a smart move to attack your employer.”

“Fine, I’ll punch you after I get paid,” she muttered too coldly for it to be taken as a joke. Izaya shrugged and returned to the window.

Namie proceeded with her duties silently, picking up the document that had just been shunted out of the printer on his desk and examining it as she filed away the other papers in her hand.

“What’s this odd piece of paper for?”

“Send that document to the Awakusu-kai office, like usual. Oh, and...get the blue envelope at the top of the rightmost bookcase and send it to a Yamada in Hagane city by certified mail. Take the sheet fourth from the top on the shelf two below that and put it in the yellow envelope on the middle shelf of the left bookcase. There’s also a verification receipt in the green envelope right above that. Send both of those to the Sakurashin trading partner in my computer’s address log. Once that’s done, copy the debtor registry on my desk and include that in an envelope to President Sagawara of Fandorfelsand Riverside Finance. After that, send a message to Mr. Shiki from the Awakusu-kai saying, ‘The location of the chocolate is still unknown.’ Once you’ve erased that message from the program history, open the crossword magazine next to the computer to page eighty-four, and fill the empty spaces with ‘broken windows theory,’ ‘shark,’ ‘Transylvania,’ and ‘natto maki.’ Any spaces that are still blank, fill in the answer on your own, because I couldn’t figure them out.”

They were like test instructions meant to measure the subject’s mental age. Izaya delivered them all without pulling his eyes from the window. When he finished, he turned around and saw Namie carrying out the orders without any doubts or questions whatsoever. She silently reordered his tasks into a more efficient order and performed each and every one of them without a mistake.

“...The last remaining word in this puzzle is ‘tocopherol calcium succinate.’ What kind of horrible person designs a crossword of commonsense answers with this technical term thrown into the mix?”

“Brilliant,” Izaya beamed, clapping his hands in admiration once she had finished all of her tasks.

“It’s also brilliant that you can point out such accurate locations of things without even looking.”

“Only because you’ve organized them all so neatly.”

“By the way...what’s the ‘chocolate’ in this message I sent to Shiki from the Awakusu-kai?”

“Hmm? A gun. Why?” he asked nonchalantly. Namie froze for an instant. “Listen, about a year ago, right after you came to work for me, someone stole some guns from the Awakusu-kai, remember?”

“The one that horrible dullahan was chasing, right? I remember the sight of the monster swinging its scythe on the TV.”

“Right. Cely managed to recover most of the guns before the police could, so nothing came of it. But the problem is, one of them’s still missing. Well, some kid found that last gun and apparently tried to use it in a recent armed robbery. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“...I just pray that no one has this room bugged.”

Namie spontaneously searched for her next task to fulfill, thinking to herself that Izaya’s cheerful but opaque smile was terribly creepy. Suddenly, the intercom buzzed.

“Who could that be? No appointments, and I doubt the police would ring the doorbell for a raid.”

“It’s not people from Yagiri Pharmaceuticals, is it...?”

Namie was originally a high-ranking member of Yagiri Pharmaceuticals, but circumstances had forced her to go on the run from the company. She examined the monitor on the intercom, squinting.

The screen showed the entrance of the building, rather than the door of the apartment. The system was designed so that no visitors could get inside without a resident’s permission, which kept most unwanted characters out.

“Oh...it’s just a kid. A teenager maybe?” Namie wondered, looking at the boy in the monitor curiously.

The apartment received young visitors fairly often, but they were usually the girls who formed Izaya’s retinue. They ranged from Gothic Lolitas to dolled-up ditzes, but they all seemed to think he was nothing more than a fancy fortune-

teller.

But it was rare to see a man. Perhaps he was the brother of one of those worshipper girls who had flown here in a rage. But Izaya patted his fist into his palm happily.

“Oh! He’s already here! He just called ten minutes ago, but I assumed he’d be coming tomorrow. Thing is...it’s almost too soon.”

He was peering at the screen over Namie’s shoulder. As soon as he recognized the boy in the monitor, he pressed the button to unlock the building door for him.

“Who is it?” she asked suspiciously.

“A friend of mine. Or perhaps like a close little brother. To sum it up in one term,” he said frankly, “a king...that I can sacrifice.”



“Why, Masaomi... I figured you’d be coming.”

A few minutes later, Izaya was welcoming Masaomi inside. The boy’s eyes danced in empty space, full of a whirl of emotions.

“When was the last time? When we ran into each other on the street last spring?”

“That’s right... It’s been a while.”

“That expression looks familiar. It’s the old you. You were only in middle school at the time, but you wore the face of an adult. So I will greet you in the best way for acknowledging times gone by,” Izaya said, chuckling at the grave-faced Masaomi.

“Welcome back.”

That was it.

It was the greatest of sarcasm and insults—and also the greatest of welcomes from Izaya.

Masaomi knew Izaya too well to say anything in response. The man was a monster who devoured others with words. Say the wrong thing, and he would

entangle that statement with one of his own, raking them over the coals, tearing them apart, swallowing them whole.

Masaomi knew this because he had been swallowed before.

When he had to race out to save Saki, why did he have no option but to rely on this man?

Since then, he had done everything in his power to avoid Izaya and had actively warned his friends against associating with him.

But now he needed Izaya's help again—even if it meant he would be used.

In all honesty, ever since Kadota had introduced Izaya as “the man who'd met the boss of the Dollars,” a certain doubt had been planted in Masaomi's mind: the nasty suspicion that Izaya Orihara himself might be the boss of the Dollars.

Surely a man of his caliber could easily conceive of the Dollars and make them a reality. But that also meant that he could have used the slasher and built an army to attack the Yellow Scarves.

He could not be underestimated in either ability or lack of ethical behavior.

“Don't glare at me like that,” Izaya said to Masaomi, who was staring holes in the older man. “Are you suspecting me of being the head of the Dollars or something?”

The information dealer had successfully drawn first blood.

“...No, I'm not...,” Masaomi responded weakly, looking away. Izaya smiled gently and guided the boy to his guest room.

It was dark. The “guest” room was only so in name—it was stuffed with cabinets and documents. The space was surrounded by shelves and paper. The sunlight through the windows did not penetrate the room; the only source of light was a weak lamp. The overall effect was one of extreme pressure on anyone trapped inside with Izaya.

“I think I know what you're here to ask about. Of course, I could have told you over the phone, but I'm guessing you wanted a more serious conversation than that.”

“ ... ”

“I heard your friend got attacked? Her name is, uh...Anri Sonohara, I believe? Sounds like a couple of the Yellow Scarves were hit as well, but the girl seems to be more important to you.”

Masaomi was not rattled by the mention of Anri’s name. Normally, he never talked about Anri to anyone other than Mikado or his classmates, but it was not a surprise that the information dealer would know these details.

He was determined to stay calm and speak as little as possible, but Izaya found just the right words to break that resistance. It was like he was playing a game.

“Does she remind you of Saki a little too much?”

“Don’t do that.” Masaomi looked away.

Izaya leaned slightly, trying to stay in his line of sight. He stared right into the boy’s face, the corners of his mouth twisting with delight. “If a girl you liked got hurt because of the war between the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves... Yes, yes, I see. It really is just like what happened to Saki.”

“...”

Izaya was not put off in the least by Masaomi’s silence. “So what is this? Are you thinking that if you stand up this time instead of running, you can make up for the mistake of your past?”

“That’s not what I’m thinking.”

“You’re just trying to convince yourself that’s not what you’re thinking, aren’t you?” Izaya said, refusing to accept Masaomi’s answer.

He propounded a theory in a clear voice that resounded off the walls, like a veteran actor practicing a speech. Clearly, so clearly. But it was not a theory as much as a figment of imagination, a thinly veiled desire.

“Let me guess your thought process: ‘I really did love Saki, but I was too afraid to save her. Maybe deep down, I just didn’t love her as much as I thought I did. What if my love was an illusion? What if it was only lust? What if I was only after her body?’ And the more you thought it over, the more you wished it was the case. Because that means you would only risk your life to fight for someone you truly loved. And now this Anri Sonohara is a test case to see if your theory is

correct, isn't she?"

His speech was so firm, so unrelenting that Masaomi didn't even have time to murmur acknowledgment at any point, much less interject to argue.

Namie listened to the whole speech as she carried out her duties, shaking her head in exasperation.

I'm surprised he can spout that garbage so naturally.

It probably wasn't that Kida boy's original train of thought, but after Izaya's cunning arguments, he might certainly be wondering to himself if that was the case after all.

Namie focused on the conversation happening on the other side of the shelves, curious about the boy's response. But the words she eventually heard after a heavy silence were far calmer than she expected.

"...If that's how you choose to see it, Izaya, then sure, let's say that. But I still want to go through with this."

"Through with what? Vengeance against the slasher? The destruction of the Dollars?"

"Depending on your answer, it could be both."

"That's the spirit," Izaya said, satisfied with his answer. He clapped his hands and stood, then spun halfway around theatrically and loudly proclaimed, "All right! It's for the sake of your forward progress. I'll tell you the facts, the truth, and the unavoidable reality, just for you. These three are usually distinct things, but at times they're all the same, and this is a good example of that!"

"...?"

Masaomi was silent for a completely different reason this time: He had no idea what Izaya was talking about.

"By the way, how is Mikado doing?" Izaya asked, bringing up the name of the boy's childhood friend just to put a nail in his confusion.

Abruptly, so abruptly.

"Huh...?"

“You know, the friend you introduced to me last spring, Mikado Ryuugamine.”

“Why would you bring his name up now?”

“Well, I just figured he would be really worried about you, given the way you’re acting,” Izaya noted, as though it were nothing more than social chitchat. But Masaomi was growing more and more irritated—just what the other man wanted.

He broke his silence.

“He has nothing to do with this. I’ve never told him about the Yellow Scarves, and he’s as fine and happy as ever for a guy as shy as he is. Unlike me, he actually enjoys his life.”

“Oh, is that so? And you don’t find yourself jealous of someone leading such a peaceful, carefree life?”

“I told you, this has nothing to do with...”

He was only able to start the sentence. Suddenly, Masaomi’s apprehension was palpable.



Izaya didn't miss it. He sank his fangs in deep.

"What if it does?"

"Huh?"

"So Mikado's doing well, then! While his friend agonizes, the very source of that pain is living his life to the fullest."

"Wait a second... What are you talking about, Izaya?"

Masaomi was asking for confirmation, but his intuition was already building an answer from inside his mind. He asked Izaya the question anyway. He was hoping that his answer would be wrong. But on the inside, he was screaming.

Don't say it.

Please, don't say a thing.

Izaya already saw every little subtle emotion in Masaomi's face. And in full faithfulness to everything that made him Izaya Orihara, he stomped all over Masaomi's wish.

"You know what I mean."

Cruelly enough, Izaya wore the very same smile he had on back when he was spilling all of the Blue Squares' secrets.

"The boss of the Dollars is your very, very best friend...Mikado Ryuugamine."

"But maybe...you're the only one who actually thinks you're best friends."



For an instant, Masaomi was completely silent.

Behind the shelf of files, Namie found herself at a standstill, too, neglecting her work.

Mikado...Ryuugamine...

Her shoulders had twitched when she heard the name spill out of Izaya's mouth.

There were three people that she loathed with all her being.

One was Celty Sturluson, the Headless Rider.

One was Mika Harima, the parasite that plagued her brother.

And the last was the founder of the Dollars, the man who had taken everything from her: Mikado Ryuugamine.

She knew everything about the connection between the Yellow Scarves and Dollars, but not that their founders were close acquaintances.

Namie shut her eyes for several long seconds—then got back to work.

She performed her duties briskly and efficiently.

All in complete silence—as she struggled to suppress the emotions raging within her.



Several hours later, Ikebukuro

Ikebukuro was a place where just moving a block over to a different street could completely change the vibe of the town. The act of stepping down an unfamiliar alley from an otherwise familiar street was more akin to riding the train and getting off in an adjacent city. Just a short distance away from the shopping district could be a long stretch of apartments and homes, a compressed assortment of wildly varied spaces that made it a good representation of Tokyo as a whole.

“Goddammit. This rain never quits.”

In a back alleyway that was on the particularly desolate and eerie side out of that incredible variety, Tom grumbled up at the sky, his trademark dreads and glasses making him recognizable from a distance.

“Well, next one’s the last for the day. Let’s collect and get this over with.”

Standing next to Tom was Shizuo in his bartender outfit. He was calm and cool, completely unlike how he’d been when he fought with Simon the day before.

“Yeah, let’s wrap this up,” Tom replied with the minimum of effort, understanding what could go wrong if he tried to play up his seniority too much.

They walked through the dim alleyway without umbrellas. The worst part about this particular collection location was that it was too cramped to get a car in there, so they had to walk.

“He should be living in this apartment building up ahead. Age twenty, already sank two hundred thousand yen into the call girl club. And he’s only been signed up for a week! How much time does that guy spend on the phone?” Tom grumbled as he trudged onward.

He stopped suddenly, noticing something wrong in the area.

There was a silhouette ahead in the narrow alley.

Several, in fact.

They appeared to be much younger boys, but they all wore yellow in one way or another. It was obvious that they were Yellow Scarves, but that gang wasn’t the type to hang out in a lonely back alley.

Sensing something was off, Shizuo and Tom turned around—and sure enough, there were another dozen youths closing in on them from the other end of the alley.

“Huh? Are we in trouble?” Tom mumbled, but there wasn’t a hint of concern on his face.

They stood in the center of the alley and watched as the youths gradually approached—at which point they realized that some within the group didn’t really fit the label of “youth” anymore.

Most notable of all of them was a large man with bandages on his head. He must have suffered quite an injury, because there were rusty red bloodstains on part of the bandage.

“Who the hell are you?” Shizuo growled in irritation when the group was about fifteen feet away. The bandaged man grinned, a snarl over gritted teeth. He hurled a mocking retort at Shizuo.

“You’re Shizuo, huh? I hear you really did my bro wrong, yeah? Mr. Big-Shot Shizuo Heiwajima!” It was a barely coherent, thinly veiled excuse to pick a fight.

“Oh yeah...?” A blood vessel pulsed on Shizuo’s temple.

“I don’t care if they call you the ‘fighting puppet’ or whatever... The Yellow Scarves have decided you need to be eliminated for good. If you don’t wanna die, start beggin’ on your hands and knees and hand over all the cash in that

bag.”

“Oh yeah?!” His eyes narrowed behind his sunglasses, a deep furrow running between his eyebrows. Tom noticed Shizuo’s manner and automatically took a step to the side.

Despite Shizuo’s obvious irritation, one particularly foolhardy boy strode up and brandished a police baton, threatening, “We know you’re goin’ around collectin’ cash for the call girl line. So what’s it gonna be? Just so you know, you knocked out my tooth a while back. So maybe you should start by beggin’ for—”

For an instant, the boy saw a small pink blob approaching him from the lower right. Somehow, the man in the bartender outfit was right in front of him.

Huh?

The shock lasted a moment.

The pain must have come after that, but the boy only felt it after he woke up.

His mind sank like a stone as he was knocked out by a blow like an upward hammer, but contrary to the downing of his wits, his unconscious body flew upward. The breath whistled out of his lips, a number of small white shards among the expelled air.

The other boys saw their companion, baton still clenched in his hand, fly in an arc through the air.

One second later, the boy with the flattened face landed right next to the bandaged man with a sound like a bag of garbage hitting the ground.

“How about I break the rest of ’em, so the hole doesn’t stick out anymore?” Shizuo grunted through clenched teeth, rolling his head back and forth to crack his neck.

Just one hit.

But the exact hit that was the most simple and most effective at changing the atmosphere of the scene entirely.

Every last one of the gang of youths, nearly twenty in all, held his breath.

One of their companions had just been knocked out, but not a single one of

them moved. At first, because they didn't understand what had happened. After understanding, because they were too afraid.

"So? What's it gonna be?" Shizuo asked without a single drop of sweat or extra breath.

The question was an honest one, not a challenge, but none of the boys were able to answer it. Shizuo strode toward the bandaged man, apparently angered that no one was responding.

The bandaged man immediately twitched into motion, calling out a loud order to his friends to hide his trembling.

"Don't pussy out on this guy! We don't gotta fight him one-on-one; jump him all at once!"

The other boys immediately jumped into action...but Shizuo was already on the move.

He trotted over to the nearest youths before he could be surrounded on all sides and gave them each a fist in turn.

"Gakh!" "Yeeb!" "Wait...I— Humf!"

With a series of rhythmic thuds—*whump, whump, whump*—the boys slammed against the walls of the narrow alleyway. Those who raised their arms to block got the painfully unpleasant sensation of their limbs being twisted out of place; those who landed a punch first felt the bones in their hands scream; and those who fled felt him grab the back of their collars and toss them up into the air, only to fall to the ground with a tremendous crash.

They might as well have been fighting a bulldozer.

The young man with the bandages on his head and the younger boys, who had been confident with the superiority of numbers, were now in a state of panic.

Shizuo Heiwajima was the very personification of terror. In the face of his monstrous, otherworldly strength, the bandaged man rocketed from a state of cockiness to the pits of fear.

And that shift caused him to undo a switch.

The young man grabbed something without thinking, a tool he had only

planned to flash momentarily for extracting money easier, never to use in earnest.

Instead...

“That’s bad news. Real bad,” Tom grumbled to himself as he watched Shizuo rage, distractedly kicking an approaching boy in the groin. “I wonder if the cops will accept this as self-defense? Bad news if someone dies, right?”

Better get going before we get into real trouble, he thought, turning back in the direction of the main street.

pop pop pop

The sounds were oddly dry, given all of the rain.

“Huh?”



They were unfamiliar sounds to his ear—but that was how he could instantly identify them.

This seems bad.

A different kind of “bad” sensation from before ran up Tom’s back, and he spun around in a hurry.

“Shizuo...?”

When he turned, he saw the illogical presence of smoke in the rain, shrouding a black object in the bandaged man’s hands.

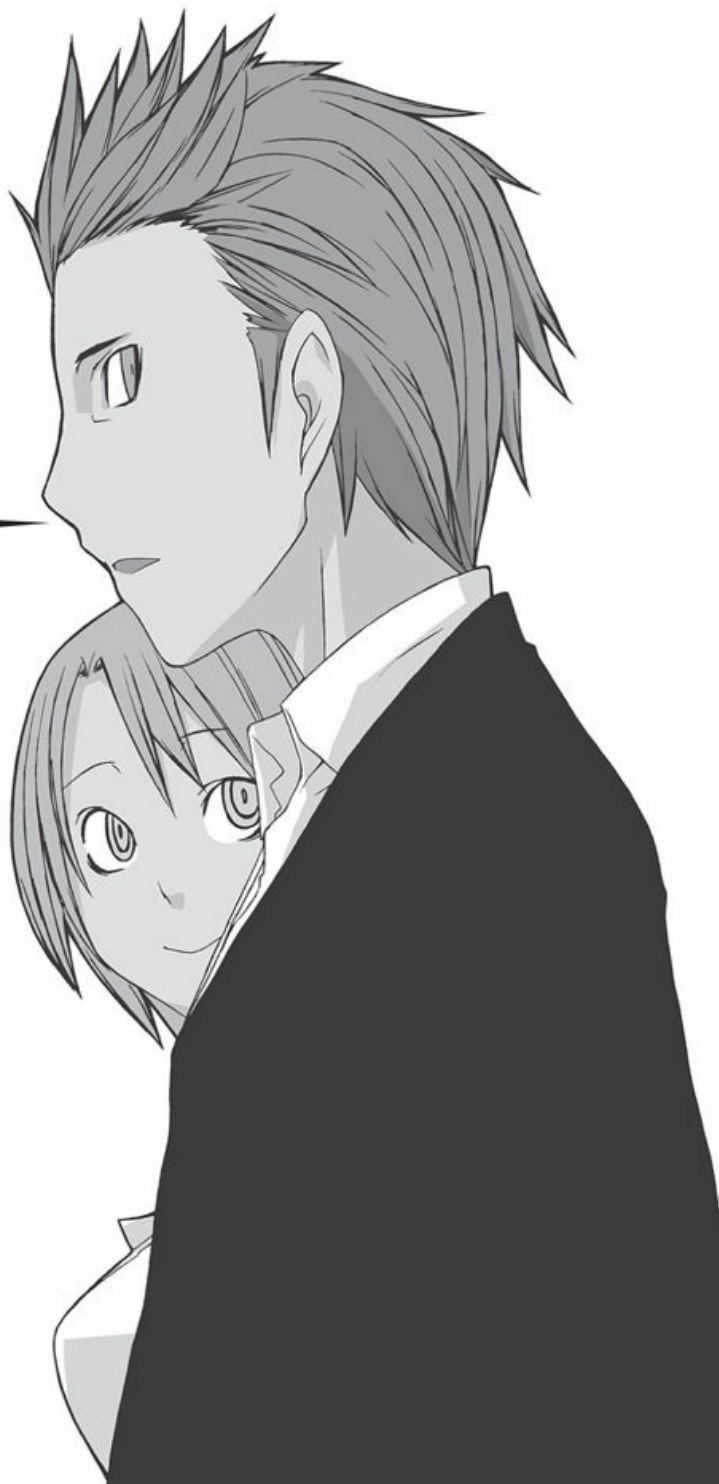
And collapsed in a massive puddle, the prone figure of Shizuo.

The red liquid seeping from Shizuo’s body spread into the puddle with an eerie marbling effect.

The rain continued its merciless fall—cruelly emphasizing the desperation of the scene.



**NEVER
GONNA
REALIZE
HOW
THEY'RE
FEELING...**





Chapter 9: Never Gonna Realize How They're Feeling...

The next day, Raira Academy

The end of the school year ceremonies were over, and the classroom was full of the air of liberation only found around students.

Some were reminiscing with their classmates before next month's class reorganization, and others were chatting about their spring vacation plans—but only Mikado chose to be alone and stare at the rain through the window.

It wasn't that he didn't fit in within the class. He was one of their representatives in the student council, so if anything, he was one of the more sociable members of the classroom.

But at the moment, he was not in the mood to be social. His two friends, who normally sat on either side of him, were not at school.

"Both absent for two days in a row...," he mumbled to himself as he stared at the sky.

He had tried reaching out to both of their cell phones, but hadn't succeeded in getting through.

What if they're on a date together...?

He didn't want to imagine that possibility, but it wasn't out of the question.

What should I do if that is the case?

If Anri had chosen Masaomi...that would be sad for him, but he wouldn't stay too down about it. In fact, he might even support them.

But if that meant that their friendship trio fell apart, that would be miserable. If they were ditching school to go hang out, they could have invited him.

Mikado slapped his cheeks to straighten out his mind.

Wait, wait, they might just be sick. No use imagining wild scenarios like that.

He would go and visit Anri and Masaomi on the way home from school today. He ought to anyway; he'd received her report card from the teacher.

Is it even within the rules to have a classmate give an absent student their grade report? he wondered—and decided to take a peek at Anri's card. *Whoa...*

I've never seen someone get perfect 10s across the board...

Anri had the look of a model student, and he knew she always got high scores on their regular tests. But even then, he hadn't anticipated the impact of those pristine numbers.

She's even got a 10 in gym...

"Hey! Hey, Ryuugamine!"

Mikado was so absorbed in spying on his friend's report card that his heart nearly stopped when someone called for his attention.

"Oh, h-hi, Harima. And Yagiri, too. What's up?"

"Actually...Mika wanted something."

It was a romantic couple consisting of two of his classmates: Seiji Yagiri and his girlfriend, Mika Harima.

The trio of Mikado, Masaomi, and Anri was well-known throughout the school, but they were no match for the infamy of these two.

They were together not only when they arrived and left school, but during break time as well. It was almost unthinkable to see them individually with other friends.

Of course, they didn't have many friends to begin with—the only person Mikado knew as a friend of Mika's was Anri Sonohara. And after these two had begun going out, even Anri had almost no contact with her old friend...

"So...what's wrong with Anri?"

Mikado was so surprised to hear Anri's name that he could only stare at Mika with curiosity. "What's wrong...? We were all wondering that ourselves. Maybe

she's sick," he said politely.

Now it was Mika's turn to look curiously at him. "Huh? Ryuugamine, didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"Anri's been dealing with some pretty big problems. Especially two days ago, right?"

"...Huh?"

Mikado was so taken aback by this sudden news that he turned to face them directly, chair and all.

"I asked her about it during cleaning time, because I was concerned for her, but she just claimed that everything was 'fine' and wouldn't say a word about it. She's always been the type to keep her worries to herself, after all. I thought maybe you'd heard something from her!"

"Er, no... Nothing at all," Mikado replied, though a sense of anxiety was quickly blooming inside of him.

He hadn't noticed even an inkling that Anri might be acting differently than usual. It came as a shock to him that he hadn't perceived any difference despite the time they spent together, yet Mika noticed Anri's change from a considerable distance.

"W-well, I'm going to pay her a visit today, so I'll ask her about it..."

"Hmm. Well, I'm worried about her, so tell me if anything happens. We'll visit when we've got the time."

"Okay," he mumbled.

With an uncertain look back, Mika took Seiji's arm and started walking off. But Seiji stopped after a step and turned back to tell Mikado, "Maybe it's not my place to say..."

"Huh?"

"But being shy and turning your back to the other person is never gonna help you realize how they're feeling," he said without hesitation, right within earshot

of his girlfriend.

“...You’re right. Thanks.”

Feeling a kind of jealousy for his forthright and outspoken classmate, Mikado was ashamed at how little he had truly been paying attention to Anri.

Seiji had a view of romance that was the polar opposite of Masaomi’s, a fact that Mikado was painfully aware of. He was hoping to speak to the boy for a bit longer, to hopefully learn something new.

“Kya-ha! And Seiji’s always watching me! Always has, always will! It’s all right, I’ve never bothered with watching anyone but you, either!” Mika bubbled like a character in a comic book, as soon as the words were out of Seiji’s mouth. She leaped onto him and clung for dear life.

The teacher was still cleaning up his desk and looked ready to say something, but he ultimately decided it would be futile. He left the room.

Next, Mika dragged Seiji after her out into the hallway, suggesting that they should make their spring vacation plans soon.

The classroom was suddenly empty, plunging Mikado into a lonely mood. He glanced back up at the sky.

For an instant, he felt like he caught a glimpse of blue sky.

But the rain still showed no sign of stopping.



Apartment building, near Kawagoe Highway, Ikebukuro

When she awoke, Anri encountered a strange, foreign sensation.

This must be a dream.

Normally, she had the same dream every time: one of her family when they were still alive. But she could tell that she was having a different dream this time.

As with any dream, it was set in the old house where her family lived happily. Everyone wore smiles that existed only in her imagination, chatting and laughing away. It was the kind of dreamy dream that could never be anything but a dream.

But today, it was not her father and mother who were with her, but Mikado and Masaomi.

Why is it Mikado and Kida...?

As she lay under the blanket with her eyes closed, Anri thought about this dream and the events of the last few days.

She found out that Masaomi was the boss of the Yellow Scarves and was embarking on a massive war because of her—and then she escaped.

How much better it would be if *that* was the dream.

As she slowly opened her eyes, the sadness settled in. The light that reached her eyes was different from usual. It wasn't just the light; it was the color of the walls, the pattern on the ceiling, the blanket draped over her, and the many expensive pieces of audio equipment and game consoles around her.

For a moment, she wondered if she was still dreaming. But then she remembered what happened before she fell asleep and realized that this was Celty's apartment.

When she got to the apartment last night, she wasn't really in any state to have a conversation. Celty saw how Anri worried about how to tell Masaomi and Mikado about this, and how to apologize for getting them involved, and told the girl, "*It's fine. You can stay here and relax until it all blows over.*"

She remembered agonizing all night until the dawn, at which point she got loopy with fatigue. She must have fallen asleep here and been left since.

Anri's glasses were on the shelf next to the bed, so she put them on to take a good look at the room and confirm that it was indeed not a dream.

I ought to thank her, she thought, sitting up.

It was an unusual awakening for her, but the cursed chant of *I love you* still rang throughout her body like always. The madness-inducing curses put her mind at ease somehow—a fact that made her sad when it registered on her.

It was normal *not* to hear voices like that, so how could she feel at ease with them?

I'm...a monster.

She had a cursed blade making its home within her body and mind, and despite its presence, she wasn't going insane—she was making good use of it. She was a creature far removed from proper society.

Maybe that was why she had that dream. Perhaps yesterday's events were a punishment she had to bear. Perhaps it was the price she ought to pay for wishing that a monster like herself could lead a normal, happy lifestyle with Mikado and Masaomi.

I shouldn't bother hoping for a human life, like other people have...

She got to her feet with this thought in mind and slowly opened the door to find...

A headless monster watching a variety show on TV as she challenged a man in a white lab coat to a handheld video game.



"Go easy on me, Shinra."

"You want me to go easy, in a block-dropping game? How would I do that exactly?"

"Don't press any of the buttons."

"That's not going easy, that's committing suicide!"

Celty and Shinra were enjoying a head-to-head video game battle, bickering away in their usual style. Celty had her laptop set up at her side and was using her body shadows to type at the keyboard so that both hands were still free to use the handheld console.

"Argh, I lost again! Damn...I hate you, Shinra."

"You do?! Wait, wait, wait! Fine, I won't hit the buttons this time!"

"Ha-ha-ha, I'm just kidding. I'm not that childish."

"Oh good... I'm so glad to be alive!" Shinra rejoiced for some odd reason. Celty set down her handheld and watched the TV screen.

There was a young actor on the LCD screen—he was at a press conference announcing his starring role in an upcoming film. His features were still boyish;

his height was average, but his face looked like it belonged to a high schooler or even a middle schooler.

“Ooh, it’s Yuuhei Hanejima. He’s really turned into a big star lately. I like his acting, he’s very good.”

“I hate to interrupt your attempt to change the subject by watching TV, but...I wouldn’t get too infatuated with him.”

Celty was confused for a moment—Shinra rarely ever turned his attention away from the celebrities on TV.

A few seconds later, she typed out a teasing response. *“Why? Will you be... jealous?”*

“That’s Shizuo’s brother,” he said. Silence followed.

Celty was still for a few moments, unable to break down the meaning of his words. Eventually, she typed a hesitant question: *“Huh?”*

“I’m telling you, he’s Shizuo’s little brother.”

“No way!”

Celty increased the font size to depict the impact of her reaction.

“If you read the ‘feather’ kanji in his name as *wa* instead of *hane*, what happens? Yuuhei Wajima, Yuuhei Wajima, Yuu Heiwajima... His birth name is actually Kasuka Heiwajima, based on a different reading of ‘Yuu.’ Just like his brother, he doesn’t live up to his name. I mean, Shizuo is anything but ‘quiet,’ while Kasuka has way too much of the spotlight to be considered ‘dim’ or ‘faint.’”

“I had no idea...”

“Then...did you know Izaya has little sisters? Two of them. Twins in middle school.”

“No way!!”

Celty was completely flustered to learn such huge details about the siblings of people she thought she knew well. Shinra grinned, ready to deliver the finishing blow.

“Did you also know I have an older sister?”

“What?! Why haven’t I heard that before?!”

“Because it’s not true... Oush, oush, oush, don’t puwl my sheek, thiff hurf but itf vewy shweet!” Shinra babbled, his cheek twisted out of shape. The movement caused him to turn and notice that the door to the adjacent room was open and a girl’s face was poking out of it.

“Hey, so you’re finally awake.”

“Ah...s-sorry to intrude like this!” she yelped timidly, as Celty hastily removed her grip on Shinra’s cheek. The dullahan typed a large-font message into her laptop so Anri could see.

“Oh good. I was almost afraid you might have fallen into an eternal sleep.”

“Th-thank you... I’m afraid I’ve been a huge burden...”

“Not at all. We were going to wake you up, but you really seemed exhausted, so we waited... We were just saying this morning that if you didn’t wake up by this afternoon, we ought to take you to a proper hospital.”

“I guess that means that playing games and watching daytime TV instead of caring for her makes us pretty wretched people,” Shinra laughed ironically.

Anri had one question based on what they’d just told her. “Um...the hospital? How long have I been sleeping?”

“Over an entire day... About thirty hours, I’d say. Oh, you did wake up once to use the bathroom, but it was pretty much sleepwalking. You collapsed right back into bed after that.”

“Don’t talk to a girl about using the bathroom, or we’ll sue you for harassment.”

“Why, Celty, you’re as punitive as a certain litigation-happy world superpower.”

Shinra and Celty were their usual glib selves, but Anri’s mind had gone completely blank. Part of it was shock that she had missed two whole school days, including the end-of-year ceremonies. But what would Masaomi think of it, too?

After what had happened at the factory, did her absence cause him to suspect that she might be the intruder after all?

Celty noticed the fear on Anri's face and approached the girl to gently embrace her shoulder and display her laptop screen.

"It's all right, I'm on your side. And this suspicious fellow in the white lab coat can be trusted... Well, he's with us."

"Why did you start writing that I could be trusted, then change your mind?"

Hearing that the headless being was on her side brought a bit of calm to Anri's mind. A normal person might have found that alarming, but given that Anri had just considered herself a monster, it was reassuring simply to have company.

Celty seemed to be even more human than human, and despite the lack of a face to see, Anri sensed that the rider was quite happy, which made her jealous.

So hearing Celty proclaim that she was "on her side" filled Anri's heart with a warmth that she hadn't felt in a long time. It was the kind of warmth she felt the first time she met Mikado and Masaomi. Anri decided she wanted to seize what was in her dreams and bring them back to reality.

Her parents were already dead, but Masaomi and Mikado were alive in the real world.

Anri made her up mind and stared at Celty, ready to speak.

About the various events around her over the last several days...



South Ikebukuro Park

A boy walked through the rain alone.

Beneath the hammering of the rain against his black umbrella, he clenched his fist wrapped in a yellow cloth.

The school ceremony had to be over by now. He hoped that Anri had noticed his absence from school and was at least concerned for him. And what was Mikado thinking?

Masaomi peered up at the rainy sky from beneath the lip of his umbrella,

envisioning his childhood friend's face. Drops hit his face between the spokes of the umbrella, but he didn't even feel the chill of the water.

"The boss of the Dollars is Mikado Ryuugamine."

The instant the truth he wanted to know came into his grasp, it sank to being the truth he *didn't* want to know.

"Why...?"

He wanted to believe it was a lie, but Izaya never lied to his clients about what they paid for. Masaomi knew that through personal experience.

Even still, it was hard to swallow.

"Why did Mikado's name pop up there?"

Izaya explained everything in detail, including the fact that the Headless Rider was one of the Dollars as well. But hardly any of that reached Masaomi. He barely even remembered leaving Izaya's apartment and wandering around the town.

"What have I been doing all this time?"

The longer he looked up at the sky, the more something soft and airy began to wriggle inside his head. It felt like reality and dreams were mixing together into a complex cocktail.

If he reached out, he might be able to grab the sky—anything he wanted might appear before his eyes if he wished for it. Either he was low on sleep or the stress was having a toxic effect on his mind.

Now that he had the information from Izaya, there was one thing Masaomi needed to do: talk to Mikado. All rational thought told him that it was the shortest path to a resolution, even if it didn't get there on its own.

But Masaomi never doubted Mikado during the whole slasher incident. He'd known Mikado since they were kids. He wasn't the type of person who harmed others, and his affection for Anri seemed real. Which meant that if the Dollars were involved, it had to be in some way that Mikado didn't know about.

What if Mikado had a secret side to his personality and actually hated Masaomi and hurt Anri because he wanted her all to himself? What if he was

putting all this pressure on Masaomi, knowing that he was the leader of the Yellow Scarves? The thought crossed his mind for an instant, but oddly enough, he didn't give it much serious thought.

"If it's really that untenable a situation, then nothing I do can resolve it. I'll have to give up."

It would mean that he'd been fooled by Mikado's smile for the entire year, but on the other hand, he'd been fooling Mikado since middle school and encouraged him to come to Ikebukuro for entirely selfish reasons. He'd have to suck it up and assume they were even—whether he got crushed by his old friend or decided to fight.

But Masaomi had a firm confidence that Mikado was not the one responsible for this. If he had wanted to do it, he could have destroyed the Yellow Scarves in a much simpler way. If he knew that Masaomi was the leader of the Yellow Scarves and had a grudge against him for that, there were ways for him to deal with the situation. He would have made use of Izaya, another member of the Dollars.

If there was any other reason that he did not suspect Mikado, it was simply the vague and baseless faith that Mikado wasn't that sort of guy.

If there was any reason that he might be irritated with Mikado, it was that he had never once told him the secret of the Dollars.

But that goes for me, too.

He recalled that he had never once told Mikado about anything to do with the Yellow Scarves, and his irritation turned inward upon himself.

With that irritation at its peak and turning to desperation, Masaomi found himself agonizing over a question: Whom did he want to see most?

Once the chaos had calmed down, where would he go back to?

He wanted to speak with Mikado and get things cleared up.

Or perhaps he could go after the slasher again, for Anri's sake.

It wouldn't be bad to hang around with Kadota, Yumasaki, and Karisawa, either.

And then...there was Saki.

Why do I bring up the name of a girl I broke up with?

He shook his head self-deprecatingly to clear the name.

The closing ceremonies had to be over by now. The options for what Masaomi could do next swirled through his head as he wandered around the park.

Suddenly, his cell phone rang.

He'd gotten a call from Mikado the night before, but he wasn't ready to talk at the time.

That's right, I can't keep running.

Masaomi thought of what Kadota had told him two years earlier and made up his mind to answer the phone. But the number on the display was an unregistered one and totally unfamiliar to him.

Based on the number itself, it looked like a cell phone. An ugly sensation came back to Masaomi's mind.

That vague unease that plagued him when he formed the Yellow Scarves.

That fear that shocked him when the Blue Squares' boss called him to taunt him with Saki.

The mix of these two emotions filled him with a sudden, intense resistance to answering the call. But without a concrete reason not to pick up, Masaomi had no choice but to hit the button and bring the receiver to his ear.

And the voice he heard was...



Apartment building, near Kawagoe Highway, Ikebukuro

"Ah...I see how it is, then," Celty typed into the laptop on the table once she had finished listening to Anri's story. *"So neither of those two you're always with—Mikado or that Masaomi boy—know what you really are."*

Anri read the flowing text and quietly nodded. It felt like she was having a conversation with a computer screen, but since she didn't know sign language, there was no other way for her to communicate. Plus, she had met Celty a

number of times since that first incident for lessons in using a computer, so she was getting used to the idea.

“Let’s see, we’ll need to think of a way to stop the warfare. Don’t worry—a plan started forming in my mind even while you were describing the situation,” Celty typed confidently. Anri felt a note of relief creep into her mind. It was the first time she could truly reveal everything about herself to another person—and not in the mind-control way—and she’d never considered that it could be such a powerful buoy to her spirit.

Maybe it would work out after all. With that spark of hope inside her, Anri began to consider her options.

But there was one thing that weighed on her. Celty had referred to Masaomi as “that Masaomi boy,” while Mikado was just plain “Mikado.”

It was a very minor distinction, but Anri decided that it wasn’t wise to leave the issue unresolved to nag at her mind, so she asked Celty directly, “Um...do you know...Ryuugamine?”

“Uh. Ohhhh... Um, let me just ask you this: How much do you know about Mikado Ryuugamine?”

“Huh...?”

Anri wasn’t expecting the question to be thrown back her, and she panicked slightly. Why were they talking about Mikado now? She didn’t know why, but she trusted Celty implicitly, so she answered the question despite her hesitation.

“Um, he’s a very good friend of mine... He’s as important to me as Kida, and we both serve as our class representatives. It’s been a long time since I just had normal friends like them...and...”

“Okay, Celty? She has no idea,” Shinra said, cutting Anri off before she spent any more time searching for words to answer the question. “It’s very strange how despite spending every day around someone—or perhaps because of that—you’re so close that the most important things actually stay hidden... But that’s only natural. I hid things from Celty for years. But I don’t hide anything anymore.”

“I know that.”

“Um, did I say something careless?” Anri asked worriedly, but Celty shook her hand back and forth to indicate that it was okay.

“No, it’s just fine. You’ll learn everything before very long.”

“Um, oh.”

Anri had no idea what she meant, but she trusted in Celty’s confidence and didn’t inquire further. Celty, meanwhile, picked up the helmet off the corner of the table and stuck it onto her neck the way one would attach a robot part.

She was clearly getting ready to go somewhere, so she pointed the helmet at Anri and typed out a message meant to put the girl at ease.

“Don’t worry about it. If all goes well, this will be entirely wrapped up by the end of today. I’m going to go bring an acquaintance along. Just wait here for now.”

“Um, okay... I’m sorry to be a burden on you for two days running...”

“Don’t let it bother you. This apartment is pointlessly huge, anyway.”

She turned to Shinra this time and sent him a message very different from what she’d been telling Anri. *“Don’t put any weird ideas in her head before I get back. This kind of thing is meaningless unless it comes straight from the horse’s mouth. And don’t interrogate her or try any weird experiments.”*

“I know. Trust me!” Shinra replied, grinning painfully. Celty looked into his eyes and tapped out a quick message.

“Trust placed. I’m going to go get Mikado. At this point, his school either gets out before noon, or he’s on vacation, right?”

She deleted the message promptly so that Anri couldn’t see, then tucked her trusty PDA into her shadow and rushed out of the apartment door. Anri watched her sudden exit, sitting in place with a confused look on her face.

The man left behind in the apartment with her was wearing a white lab coat at home, for some reason. It reminded her of the man with the white gas mask she’d met two days earlier.

“Um...I really appreciate this... You even gave me a bed and everything...”

“Huh? Oh, it’s quite all right. Celty’s friends are my best friends. What would you say to being our foster daughter? Celty doesn’t even exist on paper, so she can’t be your official mother, but still,” Shinra said easily without much thought. Anri was relieved that she wasn’t being a pain, but something in what he said struck her as odd. She stared at him.

When he noticed the girl’s mystified stare, Shinra returned it, taken aback. Her reaction was curious to him. Eventually, he understood her unspoken question and clapped his fist into his palm.

“Ohhh. I don’t think you understand, so I’ll just tell you straight...”

He laid out the truth, flat and simple, without embellishment or artifice.

“Celty’s a girl, okay?”



South Ikebukuro Park

“Hello?”

“Wha—? Yo. You the shogun? Kida? Masaomi Kida?”

The voice coming from the other end of the call was that of a throaty man, crude and vulgar. He sounded older than their generation. Just like Izumii of the Blue Squares did.

“May I ask who’s speaking?”

“C’mon, don’t be like that. I’m a pal. We’re friends.”

“Huh? No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Fine, whatever. Listen, we’re at that old factory right now. Everyone’s already here, in fact.”

A chill trickled through Masaomi’s spine. The factory he was referring to had to be the abandoned lot the Yellow Scarves used as a hideout. So was he one of them? But he’d never heard this voice before...

“Listen, I’m Horada. You know me?”

“...Oh.”

The unique sound of the name brought Masaomi back to several nights ago,

when he heard it first mentioned. “The one who got his head split by the Black Rider’s pal...”

“The hell? Is that all I am to you? The guy who got his ass kicked?”

“Uh...I didn’t mean it that way...”

Why would a man he’d never met before call him out of the blue? And at this precise moment, of all moments? The questions floated through Masaomi’s mind, but his silence worked to his advantage, as it prompted Horada to proclaim one relevant bit of information.

“Umm, so anyways, listen. You don’t gotta come no more.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sayin’, you’re fired. No more shogun. Beheaded. No more head.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Masaomi demanded, the overly familiar tone of the other man grating on his nerves. But the next moment, he heard something that made him completely forget about his anger at his phone partner.

“Is it Mikado Ryuugamine? The name of your little friend.”

“Wha...?”

The instant Horada said Mikado’s name, Masaomi’s entire body froze solid.

Why would Mikado’s name come up at this exact moment?

“What a shocker, huh? We’re all shocked over here. The boss of the Dollars, friends with our boss?”

“Wait a second... Where’d you hear that from?”

“Does it really matter? I can’t believe you were lying to us this whole time, yeah?”

“Wait... I only just learned that yest...,” Masaomi started to say, then swallowed his tongue. Who in the world would possibly believe that he’d only just learned the truth himself?

He got the exact kind of answer over the phone that he expected to hear.

“Yesterday? You’re not gonna tell me you just found out yesterday. You were best buds and classmates with this guy for over a year, and then you act like you didn’t know he was Dollars? You know that ain’t gonna fly, right? You little traitor.”

“I didn’t...”

“You should see everyone’s shocked faces over here. Well, I got chosen to be the new leader; I’m the oldest, after all. I’ll put out a death sentence on you, too. Don’t got time for it today, but you ain’t gonna be strollin’ around Ikebukuro starting tomorrow.”

“I said wait! I want to talk with... What about today?” Masaomi asked.

Horada snorted and challenged his former leader. “Now that we know who the boss of the Dollars is, we gotta spend today finding and crushing him, obviously.”

A cold sweat broke out on Masaomi’s skin, combining with the humidity of the rainy air into an unpleasant dampness. “Wait, the Dollars aren’t...Mikado, at least, has nothing to do with the slasher, I think...”

Masaomi wasn’t trying to clear up his own innocence—he was vouching for Mikado’s.

But Horada’s ugly, crude voice cut him off. “But that don’t matter no more. The slasher’s just an opportunity, ya know? Either way, the Dollars and Yellow Scarves want the other side out of their way. So it works out fine.”

“Doesn’t matter...? What do you think you’re doing? Getting revenge for your head getting busted?”

“I don’t care about that, either. It gave me an excuse, and someday I’ll kill that guy in the gas mask, but the important thing is...we can’t turn back now.”

“Can’t turn back...?” Masaomi caught a clear note of malice in the other man’s words, and he turned on Horada, his pulse racing. “Why...? What did you do?”

“I’ll let you in on one last little secret. The Dollars are done for. And I’ve already finished off Shizuo Heiwajima.”

“Huh...? Finished? What did you do to Shizuo...to that monster?”

“It ain’t your business no more. You just better pray the police believe your

side of the story—assuming the police find you before we do. Hah!”

And with that final snort, the other man hung up the phone.

Masaomi hastily tried to call his other longtime companions in the Yellow Scarves, but no one answered. The high school closing ceremony should be long over, and few of them would be diligent enough to attend a school ceremony in the first place.

But every single number that Masaomi dialed was not in use. Either they were powered off, they rang incessantly without answer, or they went to voice mail after the very first ring. The responses were varied, but the uniform *absence* of anyone to answer was cruel in its unanimity.

Masaomi clutched his useless phone and thought back to two years earlier.

The present situation was very similar to when Saki was abducted.

This wasn't his girlfriend being kidnapped. But the same kind of guilt racked him, tied his body down to the spot before anything actually happened.

It would be a lie to say that he had no fondness for the Yellow Scarves. But at this point, that meant nothing. If Mikado wound up targeted by the Yellow Scarves, the way he was targeted by the Blue Squares two years ago, and if Anri was taken hostage as a tool to draw Mikado, just like Saki had been...

He would end up losing two of his dearest friends, his “home to return to.”

“The past is lonely. You can't escape it.”

Izaya's quote from the past lay heavy on Masaomi's heart. If the past was going to come back to haunt him like this, maybe he shouldn't have been running around to start with.

Everything matched up with his situation two years back.

The only difference from back then was that this time Masaomi raced out into the unknown without any hesitation.



Run.

Run, run, run.

Just run.

His goal was clear: He had to settle with the past that had caught up to him.

He urged his nearly cramping legs onward, onward.

The boy only wanted to know what he could do, if he could overcome his past.

He ran to find that out.

On his way toward the ruined factory, Masaomi plunged into a crowd. It was the shopping area known as Sixtieth Floor Street, on the way from Ikebukuro Station to Sunshine City.

Masaomi came to a stop there, standing in the middle of the road to survey the area. It was the place where he had spent the most time hanging out with Mikado and Anri. The same went for Saki and the members of the Yellow Scarves when he was active.

He remembered how he'd showed Mikado around the area the first time his friend had visited Ikebukuro. He looked around to burn the image into his eyes one last time.

With a kind of determination in his heart, he headed for the Yellow Scarves' hideout, swearing that he would never stop again.

But he was almost immediately stopped by a familiar voice.

"Hey, Kidaaa. What wrong? Your face, very depressing. You hungry again?"

He looked overhead at the source of the voice and saw a black man standing nearly seven feet tall. He was ushering in customers from the crowd with an old-fashioned oilpaper umbrella overhead and his usual smile, but he approached Masaomi in a different way from normal when he noticed the boy's demeanor.

"Kida no happy. Very strange lately. Say crazy things, like before. Your head sick? I buy you cucumber roll, cheer you up. Kida now, you look like with Izaya."

Masaomi wanted to brush him off and continue with his pressing business, but then he remembered the previous day's events and stopped to face Simon.

"Listen, Simon... Thanks for the sushi yesterday. It was crazy good! Five stars? If I had the right, I'd give it all fifty stars and stripes! You can have the entirety of

America from me, Simon. That's how good yesterday's sushi was—but not just that time. Russia Sushi is awesome every time I eat there."

Considering what was about to happen, Masaomi might never be able to visit the place again. That meant he would never be able to repay what he owed them for their generosity yesterday. He decided he could at least give them his thanks.

"Give my compliments to the chef. His knife work was incredi..."

"Oh, Kida. You go fight now? You kill someone, get killed? Izaya put you up to something again?" Simon interrupted, as if he read Masaomi's mind.

"Wh-why would you say that? What are you, a psychic?" Masaomi laughed to hide his surprise, but he did not deny either Izaya's involvement or the possibility of a fight.

With his usual expression but a more serious tone than before, Simon said, "I hear from Tom. Shizuo shot yesterday. Bang, bang from gun."

"Huh...?"

"Kill and be killed, very bad. Where I was, when people fight, someone always die. Masaomi, you look like person ready to die. No good. This Ikebukuro. Not my hometown. Much warmer, people give food even to homeless. Not everyone die when sleep in street without vodka. Kids like Masaomi, no need to kill."

"Simon..."

There was a serious look in Simon's eyes that Masaomi had never seen before. He realized that he knew nothing about the man's past. Rumors in town were colorful—they said he was a former Russian mobster or a mercenary. Masaomi had never asked him directly.

But he didn't think Simon was lying. He must have been through serious troubles before he came to Japan. If he took that story at its word, then Simon had experienced things that no one living in Ikebukuro would ever know for themselves.

And that was exactly why he was giving Masaomi this precise, serious lecture.

But Masaomi still couldn't stop.

"Sorry... I'm sorry, Simon. I've got to go..."

He felt that standing around and listening to Simon would only make his mission harder, so he bowed and raced off.

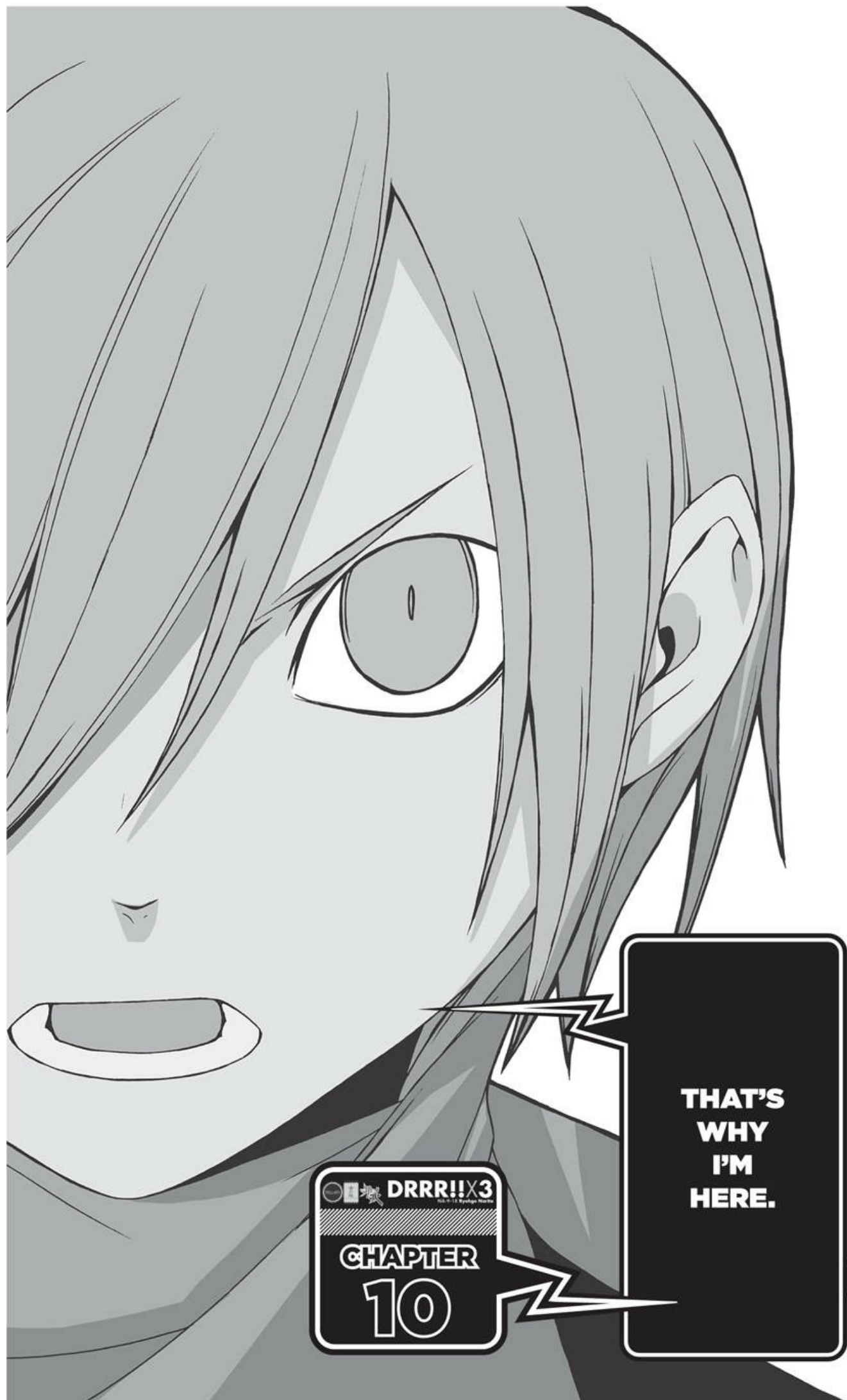
Simon didn't chase after the boy. He only watched him go, a complicated, conflicted look on his face. Even after Masaomi had vanished into the crowd, Simon stood in that spot for a while. Eventually, he closed his eyes and shook his head, then resumed soliciting for customers.

He still turned in the direction Masaomi left from time to time, however.

The town just showed him its usual, ordinary nature.

With one minor difference, perhaps.

There was absolutely no sight to be seen of any youngsters wearing yellow scraps.



DRRR!!X3
CHAPTER
10

THAT'S
WHY
I'M
HERE.



Chapter 10: That's Why I'm Here.

Apartment building, Shinjuku

Izaya opened the door and immediately spotted something out of place.

A pair of leather shoes that did not belong to him were left in the entranceway. Namie's heels were next to them, so it seemed she had welcomed a visitor. But he hadn't heard a word of it from her, and the shoes were far too big to belong to the girls like Saki or the Goth Lolis that made up his retinue.

His eyes narrowed in suspicion, and he considered just leaving. But that tension was immediately swept aside by a muffled voice from the center of his apartment.

"Don't you think that *fate* is a very convenient word?"

He couldn't hear the owner of the voice, but it was clearly directed at him.

"A variety of coincidences reframed as if their existence was inevitable... A process both logical and illogical... Which brings me to ask a man like you: Should the concept of fate be considered inevitable...?"

"You know, playing up the word *fate* doesn't actually make you sound cooler or smarter, Shingen Kishitani."

"Oh ho! How did you know it was me? Did you remember my voice?"

Izaya proceeded in the direction of the voice toward the guest room, where he saw a man wearing a white gas mask and, next to him, an exceedingly grumpy Namie.

Shingen, the man in the gas mask, had a pistol in his left hand that he had pressed into Namie's side. With his right hand, he was busy solving the crossword puzzle that Izaya had left open on his desk.

Izaya was not stunned or frightened by the scene in the least.

“Sure, the mask-muffled voice was one thing...but you’re also the only person I know who speaks in such a bombastic manner.”

“Ahh... I have to say, this crossword magazine does like its obscure answers. This one is a person’s name: ‘artist and herbalist who claimed to heal God’s illnesses through paint.’ That would be...uhh...I don’t remember. Starts with *ji*, ends with *ta*. Hmm...pass. Then, there’s this horizontal clue: ‘German artist from Gloerse Island.’ That sounds familiar, but I can’t recall it. Ka...Kar... Do you know that one? Go ahead and answer, and I’ll listen.”

“Would you mind not trying to complete my half-finished puzzle?” Izaya asked, grabbing the magazine away and sitting down on the sofa across from Shingen. “That’s quite a nimble trick there, doing a puzzle with one hand and pointing a gun with your other... But why are you pointing a model gun at Namie?”

“Oh ho... Well spotted.”

“?!”

Namie’s expression shifted wildly. Clearly, she had believed he was training a real gun on her.

“...Liar!”

“Hah! How would a normal civilian like me get a gun here in Japan? The law against owning a gun is much stricter than you imagine! But because Miss Namie did me the courtesy of being fooled, I was safely able to break through your apartment’s security system.”

“Good for you. So long now,” Izaya quipped lightly.

Shingen chuckled through his mask, unfazed in the least. “Please don’t be so cold to your old classmate’s father. I remember how you and my Shinra and little Shizuo used to get into trouble, hanging out together. Given how Shinra grew up to be so twisted, my analysis says that it was because he was trapped between the ultimate bad influences—you and Shizuo. What do you think of that?”



“So you think you have nothing to do with it? Plus, I don’t ‘hang out’ with Shizuo.”

“Ah, that’s right. Shinra always had to be the middle presence in between you two. You got along like cats and dogs.”

“So...to what do I owe the pleasure?” Izaya prompted Shingen flatly, in no mood to reminisce about the past.

Shingen noted his attitude and put the model gun away in the inside pocket of his lab coat. “Well, you should already have an idea, just from my presence here...”

“Where did you put Celty’s head?”



Ruined factory, outskirts of Ikebukuro

The yellow writhed.

Amid the gray factory interior with rusted highlights, the swarm of youths wearing yellow bandannas writhed eerily. The factory building was stuffed with even more members than a typical meeting, and in the center was a small space where well-known officers like Horada and Higa were living large over the rest of the group.

Horada sat on a leather desk chair they’d brought in, staring at the rest of the group like he was their king.

“What should we do with the Dollars’ boss, Mr. Horada?”

“We’ll just crush ‘em one by one, starting with Kadota’s group and going up. Get rid of them and Shizuo, and the rest are nothing. We can take our time putting the screws to this Ryuugamine guy.”

Horada laughed crudely, the bandages still wrapped around his head, as he played with the black piece of metal in his hands. It looked like a cheap toy in Horada’s hands, but it was undoubtedly a deadly weapon.

Everyone in the building was unpleasantly aware of the fact that the gleaming black barrel was not that of a model gun, but a real, authentic pistol. Some of them had witnessed it in action yesterday when he shot Shizuo, and most of the

others had realized by now that the other day's convenience store robbery was achieved through Horada's tool.

The reason that no one had bothered to report on him was that there was no hard proof and that he ran with a very large group, the largest faction within the Yellow Scarves at this point.

The faction would fall apart if Horada was arrested, but that would weaken the Yellow Scarves as a whole. Given that they were about to embark on a war with the Dollars, many assumed that such a loss would be fatal to the group—not to mention the fact that anyone with the conscience to snitch to the police probably wouldn't have been in a gang like theirs in the first place.

Then again, the rest of the gang wasn't exactly unanimous in support. When Horada told the group that Masaomi had betrayed them, those who knew Masaomi the longest didn't believe him—but they were not present now.

Higa's team had ventured out in the morning to crush them and steal their phones. They got Masaomi's number that way, which was how Horada gave him the news about their little revolution.

As he hung up on the call, he stared out at the mass of Yellow Scarves under his command, drunk on his newfound power. As the new shogun of the Yellow Scarves, he mocked the gathering. "Is this the Yellow Scarves you all wanna be?"

He brandished his gun for effect and smacked it against the empty drum can next to his chair. The sound was not as impressive as he hoped, and the palm of his hand stung terribly, but Horada hid the pain by giving a speech.

"Listen up! We ain't just a buncha scrubs like the Dollars! We're a unified, organized force! So we're gonna go and crush 'em and get revenge for the crap they've been pullin' with the slasher!"

No one in the Yellow Scarves doubted him when he proclaimed that the Dollars were responsible for the slasher.

"If we take out the Dollars, we'll be the kings of Tokyo itself, not just Ikebukuro! Can you imagine it?! Everyone in the entire city under our complete control!"

Of course, just being the top gang of delinquent fighters did not make them

the equal of higher powers. There were the police, the *bosozoku* motorcycle gangs, and the yakuza, all of which would come down hard on them if they stood out, but Horada's dream would not be suppressed.

He played tough on the outside, but on the inside, Horada was *terrified*.

He only hoped to forget that fear by growing drunk on power.

He knew the stories about Shizuo and thought he understood the danger the man posed. But as long as they could take him down, even if it required ambushing him with a group, they would be infamous. So he went after the man with a hit squad of twenty, which seemed like overkill.

It was not.

Half of Horada's goons were wiped out in an instant, and he sensed impending and certain death from Shizuo's approach—so in his fear, he pulled out the gun he intended to use for security and yanked the trigger.

About a year earlier, someone he knew had a plan to smuggle guns out of the Awakusu-kai, and Horada got him drunk enough to pry the weapons' temporary hiding place out of him. He then snuck a single gun and a case of bullets out and snitched the location to the cops. The guys plotting the scheme went on the run from the Awakusu-kai and police both, and no one was any the wiser that Horada had pinched a single gun for himself.

Just as he had hoped, Horada was able to get up to all kinds of mischief using it as a tool to threaten others. It wasn't until last night that he had actually shot someone with it.

The first shot tore a hole in the side of the bartender shirt, surprising him with the force of the recoil. He unconsciously lowered the gun slightly before firing the second shot, and it shattered against the asphalt, but the third one sank into Shizuo's leg.

Shizuo lost his balance and fell forward onto the street. A man who had just been exhibiting superhuman strength had collapsed onto his face before him.

I killed him.

Certain of that fact, Horada instantly felt cold sweat on every inch of his body.

He pried his trembling hand off of the pistol and spun around to survey the situation, only to see that the other unharmed Yellow Scarves were staring at him with shock and fear.

The gazes that had been trained on Shizuo just seconds ago were now on him. That was the point that he first realized there was no going back. The possibility that the gunshots might have attracted attention caused a fresh wave of cold sweat to break out.

Can't stay here now, he thought to himself.

The man who seemed to be Shizuo's coworker closed in, saying, "Wait a damn second... You sure you aren't gettin' yourself in hot water with that gun?"

"You want someone to blame? How about the guy who gave me the orders and the gun? Masaomi Kida's your man!" he made up on the spot, then ran from the scene.

The rest of the boys picked up their comrades felled by Shizuo and scampered away. The man with the dreads was tending to Shizuo and wasn't coming chasing after them.

Just as he was considering going on the run and into hiding, Horada's phone got a call from an unfamiliar number. He answered, terrified of the possibility that it might be the police or the Awakusu-kai.

Instead, the person on the other end told him about the connection between Masaomi Kida and the boss of the Dollars.

That led him to the current point.

It was a lifeline to Horada when he needed it most. By using information and power together, it was all too easy to seize control of the Yellow Scarves. And if he could swallow up the Dollars next...

That's right. With this many people, I can handle a few cops or yakuza barging onto our turf.

A few days was all he needed. If he could maintain his power, he could patch things up with the Awakusu-kai and "produce" the culprit who killed Shizuo Heiwajima for the police.

Horada even considered pinning the pistol on Masaomi Kida and burying him in the mountains somewhere. He glanced at the gun in his hand, grinning madly.

Suddenly, a rustling came from the entrance.

Is it the cops already?!

Horada scrambled to his feet and made to give orders to Higa and his other pawns. But he stopped with shock when he saw who had arrived.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Standing at the entrance was the very boy he’d just sentenced to exile and death, panting and wiping away sweat.

Masaomi Kida looked from face to face until he quickly identified the figure at the center of the group. Once he had caught sight of Horada, he glared with all of his power.

“Huh? This makes no sense. I just told you you were fired, and you’ve got a death sentence tomorrow.”

“Which means...I’ve still got today!” Masaomi said quietly, a confident smile playing across his lips. “I don’t like this revolution you’re throwing. If I’m going to be treated like a traitor, I’d like to at least get my ass kicked by the old-school members who remember me...”

He surveyed the gathering of youths again and boldly opined, “What’s going on here? I barely recognize anyone in this mob.”

He didn’t see any of the members whose cell phones he’d tried to reach just a little while ago. Masaomi wasn’t stupid enough not to understand what that meant. The smile slowly faded off of his face, and his voice got deeper.

“Unless...you’re telling me...”

The few people he did recognize were all shuffling at the back, looking uncomfortable, while those who eagerly surrounded him up close were all unfamiliar. Horada, pleased with his tactical advantage, stayed right where he was seated in his chair, confidently looking down on Masaomi. “It’s strange; everyone who was against me taking over got ambushed last night and sent to the hospital for some reason. Their phones were busted and everything.”

A spiteful sneer spread over Horada's face. He wasn't even pretending to hide the truth anymore. "Ooh, ain't that scary? Must be those Dollars at work again! Right, boys?"

He raised his hands, and the Yellow Scarves surrounding Masaomi laughed together.

"So...what's your plan?"

"Huh? Well, first we're gonna jump you... And then I suppose we'll use you as bait to lure your little buddy out."

"You son of a..."

"Hah! What an idiot. Maybe you thought you were coming to help your friend out, but all you really did was turn yourself into a hostage! Maybe I should try what *Izumii* did way back when! I'll break your arms and legs and say, 'Here's your question!'"

Masaomi went still.

"What...did you just say?"

"Huh? I said I'm gonna use you to crush the boss of the Dollars! The real convenient part about how the Dollars work is that even the members don't know who their boss is! So I can take over their information network; give whatever orders I want; and before they know it, they'll all be my faithful pawns!"

"No, not that... Did you just say...Izumii?" Masaomi asked, eyes wide and fists clenched. Inside his head, he heard that crude voice and Saki's screams over the phone.

Horada watched the change in Masaomi with glee and shouted happily, "Ha-ha! Oh yeah! After that, we've gotta think about all the bad deeds we've done as the Yellow Scarves! Maybe it's time to change our image with a new team name and color. Maybe a nice pale blue...like the color of your face right now!"

"No...you...you can't mean...", Masaomi mumbled, his lips trembling.

"You finally figured it out? That's right; everyone here," Horada said, motioning to the crowd, "is your sworn enemy: the Blue Squares! Don't bother

to disparage us by calling us the ‘remnants’ of our old gang! After all, we sure managed to swallow the Yellow Scarves whole!”

“...”

“It’s sad, really... All we had to do was take off our blue gear and ask to join, and your pals accepted us all in as brothers. I was freaked a bit when you came back, but you didn’t notice a thing! I guess that’s all the Yellow Scarves meant to you in the first place. Ha-ha...hya-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The crowd rolled with laughter to drown out Horada’s, until it was a giant wave of sound crashing against Masaomi.

He held his silence amid the overwhelming mockery. Eventually he raised his head and stared down Horada, Higa, and the others in a different way. Before, his expression was one of rage—but now, there was quiet determination and understanding.

Horada cackled at the difference in Masaomi’s demeanor and asked, “What’s up, then? You ready to get down and beg? Not that it’ll do you any good.”

“No... Actually, I feel relieved.”

“Ah? What?”

“I’m registered with the Dollars and a member of the Yellow Scarves,” Masaomi said mockingly, taking a step forward. “But I’ve been fired from the Scarves and can’t trust the Dollars. Now I’m just a flashy teenager.”

He took another step forward. Caution strengthened among the nearby youths. As they closed slightly on him, several of them went to lock the door so that Masaomi couldn’t escape.

But the frivolous-looking teen, with his brown hair and pierced ears, wasn’t bothered in the least. His voice was absolutely calm.

“That’s why I’m here.”

He took another step. And another.

“I’m just Masaomi Kida.”

As he took yet another step toward Horada, his words grew more and more

powerful.

“That’s why...I’m here!”

Masaomi took another step—to protect those he cared about. No more reason than that.

With each quiet step, the tension in the crowd around him increased noticeably.

But the one truly feeling the pressure was Masaomi himself.

That’s right. This situation is my past.

The past I’ve been trying so hard to outrun somehow circled around ahead of me.

“You can’t escape it, no matter how you struggle. No matter where you go, the past will follow you. No matter how hard you try to forget, no matter if you die and let it all disappear, the past will always be right behind you, chasing you down. Chasing, chasing, chasing, chasing... Do you know why?”

As those words that he’d once heard in the hospital repeated inside his head, Masaomi saw a number of faces.

Anri, Mikado, Kadota, Yumasaki, Karisawa, Simon...

And Saki.

“Because it’s lonely. The past, memories, and outcomes are all very lonely things. They want a companion.”

Masaomi recalled those words of Izaya’s. He mumbled, “Now it’s my turn to chase my own past.”

“Wha—?”

“I hear the past is lonely—so I better catch up to it soon.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about? Moron!”

Irritated that his former leader continued his fearless approach, Horada grabbed a crowbar from one of the boys near him and hurled it at Masaomi’s face.

Masaomi didn't even try to dodge. The nail pry on the end of the crowbar hit him in the face. But he didn't shy backward. He reached out and caught the bar as it fell to the ground. Blood streamed from his forehead down the side of his face, but he kept walking without wiping it.

"I didn't come here expecting to be killed."

Now the boy had a weapon in his hands. Horada felt a small note of unease at the sight—and it was he who had given him that weapon.

"I came here expecting to *kill*. You, in particular."

The unease turned to fear.

Despite his advantage in age, despite his advantage in build, despite the presence of the deadly weapon on his side, despite the almost laughable amount of manpower at his disposal.

"I'll say it as many times as it takes."

With each step Masaomi took, a certain possibility grew larger within Horada.

"That's why I'm here."

Another step. And another step.

"And no one can deny that!"

Horada realized the nature of that possibility.

The very slight, extremely unlikely possibility that before he could have the boy beaten to a pulp, Masaomi might come and kill him first.

The instant he realized that, his unease changed into recognizable fear. A shriek emerged from Horada's mouth in the form of an order.

"What are you guys doing?! Crush that idiot's skull already!"

At the same time, the other boys, immobilized by the same anxiety as Horada, snapped into motion.

The violence of numbers bore down on Masaomi.



Apartment building, Shinjuku

Shingen inhaled the scent of the tea Namie offered him through his gas mask as he ran through the series of events.

“Well, after Miss Namie went on the run, Yagiri Pharmaceuticals was acquired by Nebula, if you recall. The company was independently investigating the trail of the head—well, of Namie—and I spotted her visiting your place from a variety of hotels. So as she was making her way here today, I used this model gun to convince her to let me in.”

“Should we call the police, Izaya?”

“Wouldn’t that cause trouble for you? A warrant based on my testimony produces a young woman’s head... It would be the newest sensation—forget about that old slasher. Perhaps I should engage in some self-orchestrated message board drama to heighten the anticipation.”

Izaya sipped his tea with a calm smile as Shingen went on at length about the ways in which he could sabotage them.

“Clearly Shinra got his twisted personality from you.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, my boy. Now show me the head.”

“What is his problem?” Namie asked, disgusted.

In contrast, Izaya was used to dealing with him, and he responded to Shingen in kind. “The only answer I can give you is no...but I’m curious as to what your response would be.”

“If I said this building might get invaded by a gang of armed robbers in the near future, what would you do?”

“Then, I’d say you shouldn’t have come here today. I could have this room spotless and empty by tomorrow morning,” Izaya answered the man twenty years his senior without a hint of intimidation.

“Ha-hah... I’m only joking. In all honesty, I don’t need the head back anytime soon.”

“Oh?”

“Our higher-ups at Nebula were more than a little shocked to see footage of Celty in action on TV. They determined that it might be better to research her

body, rather than the head,” Shingen stated, all business. Namie found herself questioning his sanity.

Izaya was engaging Shingen in the conversation, weighing his statements, but his expression suggested that he wasn’t able to judge the other man’s intentions yet.

“Now I am on a mission to search for the location of the head. You seem to have a different approach to this head than we do. Under the ‘Valkyrie equals dullahan’ theory, you believe that placing the head into a certain type of power struggle will cause it to awaken on its own. A fascinating idea.”

“Oh...? I thought I got rid of all the bugs.”

“...I said that as a joke. Is it true? You’re really following such an obscure theory?”

“...”

It was extremely difficult to read the expression of a man wearing a joke of a gas mask to ascertain if he was serious or not. Izaya sighed in resignation and decided to explain his current strategy.

“I’m trying a number of things. If it comes down to it, I’ll just have to take it to a war-torn region, but I’d appreciate a cooperative response, if possible. Unlike you, I don’t have the facilities for proper scientific monitoring.”

“Ah... Well, test out whatever you wish. If you go through me, I can put our resources at your disposal...under our supervision, of course. To be honest, I am curious about your actions. No one else around me has considered experimenting from a mythological standpoint. And neither have I.”

“Well, thank you.” Izaya grimaced, sipped his tea, then regained his confident grin. He explained to Shingen, “As a matter of fact, I was really getting somewhere with this. I whipped up a number of gangs into an antagonistic frenzy to make them wipe each other out. And the people at the center of them were linked both by friendship and romance.”

“Ahh.”

“They were trapped by the whirlpool of violence—fated to fight, even as they

cared for the others... And one of them is like Celty, a being slightly removed from this world.”

“Are you speaking...of Saika?” Shingen piped up excitedly. “Are you sure this wasn’t just your own desire, unrelated to experimenting on the head?”

“I won’t deny that.”

“So, when you say you were ‘getting somewhere,’ that implies that ultimately, you did not ‘get somewhere.’ What do you mean?” Shingen asked.

Izaya sighed confidently and replied, “I think you know what I mean.”

“Celty has gotten more involved with two of them than she needs to be.”



Ikebukuro

Once he returned to his apartment, Mikado decided to head for Anri’s place first.

He was preparing for the trip and feeling slightly apprehensive when he heard a whinny that he would never mistake for anything else.

“...Celty?”

The only possible explanation for the sound of a horse whinnying outside of his metropolitan apartment building was Celty’s black motorcycle. And if it was making that sound out front, it meant she had paid a visit to Mikado for something.

But...why now?

Despite his delight at the return of the “extraordinary” to his life, Mikado felt a pang of anxiety and doubt. Could it have something to do with Anri and Masaomi?

He threw open the door to his apartment, worry gnawing at his chest. Celty was standing at the door about to press the buzzer. She quickly yanked her hand away, looking guilty.

“Hi, Celty. What’s up...?” he said, greeting her with his usual happy smile. She held out her PDA apprehensively.

"I know this is a sudden question, but...do you love Anri Sonohara?"

"Huh...?"

What kind of question was that to ask completely out of the blue? Even worse, his apprehension about Anri was apparently proven true. Panic began to eat away at his heart for a number of reasons.

Mikado's confusion was painfully apparent just from looking at his face. But before explaining things more thoroughly, she wanted to be sure of that one thing, while he was still ignorant of the rest.

So she threw him an even more pressing question.

"If you're invested in her happiness...would you be able to reveal all of your secrets?"



Apartment building, Shinjuku

"I see... If they know someone as powerful and connected as Celty, that might be disastrous for the intractable warfare you desire."

Shingen slurped his room-temperature tea through a straw stuck into the gap of his mask. The image was nothing short of a joke, but his manner was dead serious when he finished sucking down the tea.

"I have one piece of advice."

"Oh?"

"If you want to mimic a war here in Tokyo to agitate Celty's head—or soul—then perhaps rather than getting her involved with someone else's battle...what if you used her body as the focal point, wreaking havoc on the surroundings instead?"

The suggestion was horrifically cruel and calculating. Izaya simply curled up a corner of his mouth and said, "That's my plan."

Shingen's reaction to this proclamation was hidden from view by the gas mask. An eerie silence settled on the gloomy room. Izaya decided to break it, though it didn't particularly bother him. He launched into a further explanation of the incident he found himself involved with.

“Actually, this event is truly fascinating. These three people, so close to one another, each bore a terrible secret, and...through coincidence and a single act of malice—by me, of course—they were each informed of the others’ secret in nearly the ideal circumstances. Of course, it would have been *truly* monstrous if it had happened after the battle had gone to the point of no return.”

“The only monstrous thing here is you,” Namie muttered, but Izaya pretended not to hear.

Meanwhile, Shingen filed away what he had just heard. He announced his opinion on the matter with his usual flair. “I see. Malicious coincidence, overlapping and leading to more misunderstanding... It’s the kind of thing that happens so often in this world, it’s hard to call it ‘coincidence.’ You might call it human nature instead.”

As an unexpected part of that chain of coincidence whether he realized it or not, Shingen muttered a final statement from a lofty vantage point.

“Well, I believe I shall be going now...but remember one thing, information agent.”

“Which is?”

“The chains of coincidence do not only occur in the direction of misfortune.”



Interior, ruined factory

With a grunt, another Yellow Scarf—or perhaps he was really a Blue Square—collapsed next to Masaomi.

Over a dozen teens were already rolling around on the ground at his feet, clutching their arms, legs, or heads.

“Hey, he’s just one guy! What’s taking you so long?!”

At some point, Horada had gotten out of his chair and to his feet. He had the gun clutched in his hand, but he was taking a step backward, trying to put distance between him and the advancing Masaomi.

He was certain that when his companions closed in all at once, their victory was instantly assured. But that moment had passed, and Masaomi was still

standing.

Naturally, he wasn't unscathed. But all of the truly devastating blows were coming from him, not the other way around.

Horada's command sent the useless posers, who had no experience with group fights, forward in an attempt to drive away their momentary intimidation. Rather than attacking his blind spots in groups of three or four, they all rushed in like sardines, swinging metal pipes and the like. Predictably, they mostly got in one another's way, hampering their ability to fight.

Meanwhile, Masaomi didn't swing his crowbar around like a bludgeon, but held it out straight, striking at ribs, collarbones, and knees.

His attacks were as ruthless as they were efficient. It was if he was trying to pierce straight through his opponent's body with each blow. With every merciless strike, the Yellow Scarves each reconsidered their own attack for an instant, giving him more time to swipe with the crowbar. No mercy, no hesitation.

Who was going to be first to leap into an attack that could easily get himself maimed? If anyone locked eyes with Masaomi, they were the next to fall prey to the crowbar. The bodies of the wounded were a physical and mental wall that served as a warning to the rest.

And if there was any mistake that Horada made, it was his sore underestimation of Masaomi's power.

Horada had pegged him for the opportunistic type of leader, but he did not realize that the Yellow Scarves were originally formed around the bedrock of Masaomi's fighting ability. He had taken part in several fights that pitted him against larger groups completely alone.

But naturally, Masaomi's body was accumulating steady damage. There were multiple trickles of blood coming down his forehead. His movement had been noticeably slower since taking a metal pipe to the ribs—he might even have cracked a few.

But Masaomi didn't go down.

No matter how many blows he took, he continued his inexorable progress

toward Horada.

Meanwhile, no one was bothering to stand in his way to form a human barricade around their leader. They just stood around as the same event played out over and over. About half of the gathering was just watching from a distance, not making any effort to join the fray.

Y-you useless idiots...

But he also couldn't just run for it and be the first out the door.

The possibility of death flitted across Horada's mind again.

If it comes down to it...

He clutched his gun and considered creating his second victim. If he shot him in this state, the other guy would die for sure this time, but only if it came to that.

Should he just go ahead and shoot him now? Horada was losing his ability to make rational decisions. He clutched the gun, swallowing hard—and the situation made a tiny bit of progress.

“Die!”

One of the boys' hearty swing of a metal rod connected with Masaomi's head, and he collapsed to the ground.

“Oh...? Heh...heh-ha-haaa! Don't scare me like that, you little shit!” Horada crowed, relaxing his grip on the gun and moving closer to the prone Masaomi.

He raised a foot, preparing to stomp his helpless victim into oblivion. In a flash, Masaomi leaped up and swung his crowbar down at Horada's head.

“Raaah!”

But the strength went out of Masaomi's knees, and the tip of the crowbar fell just an inch short as it dropped.

“H-hyaaah!”

Horada was half-mad at that point, however. He leaped aside like a terrified dog, turned his gun on Masaomi as the boy slumped to his knees, and...

Instead of a gunshot, there was a sharp metal *clang*.

A shock ran through Horada's hand. The gun he was holding flew through the air and landed elsewhere inside the factory.

Even Masaomi didn't understand what happened.

One of the men near Horada had suddenly swung a knife, knocking the gun out of his hands with inhuman quickness.

The man with the knife dully told the stunned Horada, "Um, sorry. If you kill him, Mom will be sad. So I acted on my own. Yes."

"What?! What do you think you're...do...aaah?"

All the boys who saw the man's face scrambled backward. The man holding the knife had eyes that were pure, deep red—as though the entire whites of his eyes were bloodshot.

The knife wielder looked around the scene and said again in monotone, "Well... I can tell. Sorry. I can tell Mom is very close by."

The next instant, there was an incredible crash from the entranceway of the factory.

All present turned to look that way and saw the lock placed on the door being blown clean off.

The padlock fell to the ground as cleanly as a vegetable chopped by a kitchen knife. The door blasted open...and Masaomi saw.

At the door was a girl with the same katana that he'd seen two nights earlier.

When she saw him about to be stomped by the gang, she cried out, "Kida!" and raced over to him.

"Huh...?"

What's Anri doing here?

Why does Anri have...a katana?

Masaomi's world lurched perilously.

He wasn't quite able to put together the "Anri equals slasher" equation in the heat of the moment, but there was no denying the extreme confusion he felt at the bizarre combination of Anri and an old-fashioned katana.

And then came the ultimate element of confusion roaring into view.

Right around the time that Anri reached the spot just in front of Masaomi, a powerful whinny echoed off the walls of the factory.

The Black Rider!

Why did Anri show up?

Why did she have the same kind of katana as what the girl two nights ago had?

Why would he hear the sound of the Black Rider's motorcycle right now?

There was no end to the questions, no lack of confusion, and no time to think about anything.

But the biggest problem of all, the thing that dulled his resolution to risk death...was the appearance of the Black Rider—and the boy sitting on the rear edge of the seat.

It was the person he was least ready to face—but most eager to talk to.

"Masa...omi...?"

"Mika...do...?"



Twenty minutes earlier, apartment building, Ikebukuro

"Huh...?"

A number of emotions flew through Anri's mind when she learned that Celty was a woman. But before she could process them to ascertain their true meaning, she was distracted by a sound from the other room.

It was the room farthest into the apartment, not the one where she had slept.

"Oh? Is he already awake...? Those were pretty hefty tranquilizers I gave him," Shinra said morbidly. Anri focused on the far room, curious about the source of the sound.

The door slowly opened to reveal a man's face.

"Hey, where are my shades?"

It was a blond man wearing a button-up shirt.

“Hi. Your brother was just on TV. Starring in a film? Congrats.”

“Oh, Kasuka? Yeah, I think I remember him mentioning that.”

Anri felt her pulse leap as she listened to their mundane chat. The cursed voices that welled up from within her were raising a cheer more powerful than any she'd ever heard.

Understanding and memory came swiftly to her.

About two weeks earlier, when she first met Celty, this man had completely flattened one of Saika's "grandchildren."

Shinra was completely oblivious to Anri's petrification. With surprise in his voice, he asked the man, "Listen, Shizuo... You got shot in the leg and the side and suffered tremendous damage. How are you standing and walking around already?"

The doctor's tone suggested that the other man was violating everything he knew about life. Shizuo Heiwajima only raised his eyebrows a bit.

"Why...? Because I can stand and walk, obviously," he said unhelpfully.

On the inside, Anri's cursed voices churned and roiled even harder. She shoved the voices into the world within the painting frame and spoke to the man who once saved her from the slasher.

"Um...Shizuo...why are you...here?"

"Huh...? Uhh...crap. Who are you?"

Shizuo didn't recognize her. He started to mull it over in earnest. Meanwhile, Shinra explained what had happened while she was asleep.

"Oh, him—he got shot yesterday. Took bullets to the leg and ribs, and while he was off-balance on the ground, the shooter ran away. What a clumsy klutz, am I right?"

"...You want to die?"

"I am so sorry with all of my being."

With a single glance from Shizuo, Shinra was down on his hands and knees.

Shizuo had clearly given up on trying to remember Anri. "At first I thought I

slipped and fell because of the rain...then I noticed all the blood coming from my side and leg. That's when I realized I'd been shot, and I was ready to kill them all...but they'd all run away already. Then, Tom said some scary stuff about dying of lead poisoning if I didn't see a doctor..."

"What made you choose a black market doctor like me? I lost a couple good scalpels trying to cut out the bullets."

"Who wants to go through all that police questioning about the bullet wounds? I figured it would be cheaper in the long run to go with you," Shizuo answered simply.

Shinra sighed and asked, "Anyway, what's your plan after this?"

"Ain't it obvious?" he replied, his face suggesting that there could only be one answer.

He had no idea how cruel an answer it was to Anri.

"I'm gonna find the guys who shot me, and this Masaomi Kida asshole who gave them their orders, and kill 'em all."



Present moment, abandoned factory

And then Anri was here.

She knew about Shizuo's strength. Given that he could easily kill Masaomi, she considered it smarter to help Masaomi escape than try to convince Shizuo not to kill him. Shizuo and Shinra had been talking about something, but she didn't hear them—she was too busy sending a text message to one of her "children" in the Yellow Scarves.

That was how she learned the Yellow Scarves were gathered at the abandoned factory. She broke free from Shinra when he tried to stop her and raced on foot to the scene.

But the message did not contain a particular piece of crucial information.

That there had been a revolution within the Yellow Scarves and Masaomi was already exiled from the group.

"Kida!"

Anri exposed herself for all to see, boldly standing to block the way and protect Masaomi, when—

“Masaomi!! Sonohara?!”

It was Mikado, seated behind Celty. He saw the state of the factory from the back of the motorcycle and called out to them in shock.

He couldn't be blamed. One was brandishing a deadly weapon, and the other was bloody and beaten.

He had called out their names because his emotion preceded his understanding.

Mikado leaped from the motorcycle and raced over to the bloody, kneeling Masaomi.

Celty, too, viewed the scene with conflicting emotion.

What is this? What is...going on here?

On the phone, Shinra had said, “Anri got a message and just up and ran out the door. I'm trying to chase after her, but... I think she's heading for the abandoned factory, but I can't...breathe... Geez, she's fast! Anri! So! Fast!” So she had taken Mikado with her on the bike straight to the factory.

As they rode, she showed Mikado a PDA message that read, “*Are you prepared for what's next, no matter how awful a sight it might be?*”

Celty had been imagining the Masaomi boy leading the Yellow Scarves into battle against Anri with her katana.

That was what I figured would happen... So what exactly is going on?

For whatever reason, the boy who was head of the Yellow Scarves was being mobbed by his companions in yellow.

“You're right... This is a horrible sight...,” Mikado mumbled when he saw Masaomi.

Why was Masaomi being ganged up on by the Yellow Scarves? Why was Anri here, and why did she have a katana with her? There were plenty of questions.

And the other two must have had questions of their own.

Yellow Scarves, Dollars, slasher.

Three symbols floated into three heads—but it all went out the window the moment they saw one another's faces.

All the information each one had gained...

All the doubts they'd felt about the others...

All of it confirmed as *trivial* with all their hearts.

In the moment, they each thought and acted with no concern except one another's safety.

The confusion held true for Horada as much as it did for the trio.

"There you are, Black Rider... Crap... Whatever's happening here, go, guys! Pound 'em all into dust! And take the empty-handed kid hostage!" he shouted, just before a voice piped up from the crowd.

"Now! Turn traitor!"

"...Huh?"

Horada looked around, unclear what the shout was supposed to mean.

He saw something he could not believe.

Hey... What's going on...?

What the hell is happening here?!

Horada's parched throat swallowed dry spittle. They were supposed to take the boys captive to immobilize the Black Rider and the katana chick, then surround them and wipe them out. That was the image he had in his head.

But he never could have imagined what he was actually seeing.

The Yellow Scarves were attacking *one another*. The ones going after the intruders were hit by other members from the side, and those who went after those attackers suffered jump kicks themselves.

Everywhere he looked in the factory, similar events were playing out. More and more Yellow Scarves were hitting the ground.

In particular, one man was laying Yellow Scarves flat at a frightful pace, a man

with black hair and a yellow scarf. When he met eyes with the dumbfounded Horada, he pulled the scarf off to reveal—

“Yo.”

“K...K...Kadota! You...you son of a bitch!”

“I figured it was you. When Izumii and them got hauled in, you were the only one who got away, and you also didn’t get stuck with any charges... And here you are, acting like quite the big man. I’m surprised. Y’know, if it’s this easy to infiltrate with just a scrap of cloth for disguise, maybe it ain’t the best thing in the world to grow your numbers, is it?” Kadota muttered with a smirk. He turned to Masaomi.

“That was scary, wasn’t it? We thought you were gonna get shot...but I guess the slasher saved your ass, for whatever reason... Sorry, man. We couldn’t act until we knew that gun was out of the picture.”

Still unclear on what was happening, Masaomi used the crowbar as a crutch to get to his feet. He asked the older man, “Kado...ta? Wh-what is this...?”

“When you said the name Horada, I knew it sounded familiar... So I looked into it and found out what was going on. We got about thirty of the Dollars together with some random scraps of yellow and snuck in. I left Yumasaki and Karisawa behind, since they’d stand out.”

Kadota paused to knock out another “enemy” Yellow Scarf. He made it sound easy, but scraping together thirty people to infiltrate the midst of the enemy was no easy feat. Masaomi watched the man who had once saved Saki—a man with a universal, undeniable charisma, unlike him and Horada. The only things he could register in the moment were shock and gratitude.

The group Kadota pulled together all recognized one another. But from Horada’s Yellow Scarves’ side, they didn’t know who was friend and who was foe, particularly in the midst of such chaotic battle.

“D-damn...wh-what’s going on here?! My gun...where’s my piece?!” Horada shrieked, looking for the weapon that had been knocked out of his hands earlier—defeat was almost certain now, and his top priority was survival.

But there was no black hunk of metal to be found on the ground.

“Hey,” came a voice over his back. “Years ago...was that you...with Izumii?”

He felt his heart being crushed. Horada’s body and breath went entirely still. The only thing moving was the flow of cold sweat.

“Who broke Saki’s leg? Was it you?”

“N-no, I didn’t...,” Horada stammered, teeth chattering, as he imagined the figure of the boy standing behind him.

The smaller boy, raising the metal crowbar, bloodied to hell and without mercy.

“Who made Saki cry? Was it you?”

“...Dammiiiiit!”

Horada pulled a small knife from his pocket and spun around, thrusting it with all his might. But Masaomi’s fist, wrapped in a yellow bandanna, slammed into his face instead.

“In reality...I should have split your skull with that crowbar,” Masaomi murmured, as he gazed down at the writhing Horada. He could sense two figures watching him nervously from behind. “But Mikado and Anri don’t belong to this world.”

Masaomi kept his face hidden from them. He mumbled, “They don’t need to see a dead body. So I changed my mind.”

But from deep down, he was suddenly possessed by an urge to see their faces.

It could just be chat—no need to talk about the Dollars or Yellow Scarves. He just wanted to speak with them...

That was when he saw some of Horada’s juniors dragging him away from harm.

“No, wait...”

He took a step forward to go after them. But with all of the tension and nerves gone, Masaomi’s body had reached its limit, and he collapsed to the ground.



“Masaomi! Masaomi! Hang in there, Masaomi!”

“Kida!”

The sounds were amplified several times, slamming into his brain.

Through the haze, Masaomi could see a teary-eyed Mikado rocking him and Anri leaning over with a similar look of concern.

The sight of their faces next to each other drove all thought of the Dollars or the slasher from Masaomi’s mind. All he could think was how alike their expressions were.

Damn. Why do they look like such a good couple?

Masaomi put on a wry, brave grin as he gritted his teeth against the terrible pain overwhelming his body.

So who suits me, then...? I guess that’s obvious. Whether we fit each other or not doesn’t matter.

“If you’re gonna take me to a hospital...can I ask you for a favor?” he asked in his tattered state. Mikado and Anri looked overjoyed just to know that he was still alive.

They’re as happy as if it was them pulling through, not me.

“Make it Raira General Hospital.”

I guess I was the only one mistrusting the other two.

“There’s a girl waiting for me there. Please.”

He was barely able to keep his thoughts and words aligned anymore, but he could hear Kadota mutter exasperatedly, “Sheesh. I toldja not to run, but I didn’t mean it *that* seriously. Gotta know when to balance it out, man.” His tone was gruff, but there was respect for Masaomi in his eyes.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you to Raira Hospital soon,” Kadota said firmly, the last sound Masaomi heard before he lost consciousness.



Outside the abandoned factory

Horada loaded into an older car with his posse, slammed the door, and jammed on the pedal. The tires squealed a bit, but within a few seconds, the

passenger vehicle was racing along.

“Ah! Wait, Horada, I don’t see Higa!”

“Screw him!”

Horada peeled the car out, not caring that his companion had been left behind in the factory. He could see the abandoned building shrinking in the rearview mirror. But when a black motorcycle emerged from the grounds, the car erupted into panic.

“Oh sh-sh-shit! The B-Black Rider’s comin’ after us!”

“Just shut up!” Horada screeched, slamming the gas pedal as deep as it would go. “Go, dammit... Go, go, go! What the fuck is happening?!”

“What are we gonna do, Horada?!”

“Just run for it! The cops ain’t comin’ yet! As long as we get away until things cool down, and Izumii gets out of juvie, we can still turn things around!”

The factory’s street was an empty straight shot, and luckily for them, there were no oncoming vehicles. That meant they could use the space to speed up and put distance between them and the Black Rider.

“Ah! H-Horada, up front!” cried the man in the passenger seat.

“What?!” He looked forward.

A familiar man was standing ahead, leaning against a road sign and glaring at them.

“It’s him! The bartender outfit... Shizuo! Shizuo Heiwajima!”

“What?! He’s still alive?!”

Shizuo was not dead.

When that fact sank into Horada’s consciousness, he felt not relief that he was not a murderer after all—but the instantaneous and absolute fear that loomed directly ahead.

And he had no gun now. Even if he had it, there was little belief within him that he could win.

“Huh? Wait, why’s there a signpost there?” the man in the passenger seat wondered.

At that very moment, just ahead and on the side of the road, Shizuo lifted up the signpost that he had *actually been holding all along*.

“Huh?” all the riders in the car said in perfect harmony. Shizuo recognized the man inside the car with the bandages on his head. A vein bulged on his face, and a violent grin appeared on his lips.

The next instant, they were greeted by the sight of a street sign being swung horizontally toward them like a baseball bat.

An indescribable shattering sound echoed through the lonely residential street.

“Ugwoaaaaahh?!”

Everyone in the car screamed and shrank back, but they didn’t suffer anything more than the impact against the car and the sprinkling of broken glass on top of their heads.

—?!

Horada looked up, unsure what had just happened. All he saw was the rest of the road stretching ahead of them, the same as a second earlier.

Where’s Shiz...huh?!

They looked for the rearview mirror to catch sight of him, and it was only then that they realized what had happened to the car.

The surprisingly fresh breeze. The absence of the rearview mirror.

These things made perfect sense now. After all, the roof of the car was entirely *gone*.

There were just a few scraps of the window frames left and the bottom half of all the glass windows.

Now that they were riding in the world’s ugliest convertible, all the boys realized that their heads could easily have flown off in the impact—and they quaked in delayed terror.

They had made an enemy of Shizuo Heiwajima.

And *this* past, a past that Horada had initiated just one day earlier...

...was not going to let them escape.

“Not...so...faaaaast!” came a roar from far behind them.

A violent impact shook the chassis of the car at the same time the group heard the bellow.

The nature of the impact from behind was actually quite simple. Between the driver and passenger seats, a NO TRESPASSING signpost stuck into the floor of the car.

From that point on, their memories became temporarily fuzzy.

The next thing he knew, Horada was racing through waves of cars at blinding speed, screaming all the while.

“Aaaaaaaaahhh! Aaaaaa— Aa— Aaaa— Aah! Aaaaahh!”

The freshly converted convertible raced forward and onward on the busy street, ignoring the blaring horns around it.

Wh-what? When did I get here?!

Horada regained his wits but wasn't able to process the situation yet. He weaved through the cars ahead of him, ignored the lights, and did everything he could to race from the fear he felt sneaking up on him from behind.

How long had they been fleeing?

Suddenly, Horada heard the sound of an engine. Not a car engine, but the particular sound that came with the two-wheeled kind of vehicle.

“Hyaaaaaaaaa!”

His head filled with a vision of the Black Rider, Horada turned the car straight in the direction of the motorcycle engine sound, hoping to crush the smaller vehicle in his panic.

But Horada was missing one detail.

The sound of the Black Rider's bike was different from normal motorcycles.

And the motorcycle that Horada's car was bearing down on at high speed was

a very particular one.

Far behind them, Celty shivered and put her hands together to say a short prayer for Horada's car. She silently rode away from the major street to ensure she didn't get caught up in what was about to happen.

One had to feel sorry for Horada's group. They made the mistake of picking a fight with the police chopper.

"Trying to run a traffic cop off the road before he can even issue a warning? You've got guts."

"Eh, wheh?"

The police motorcycle deftly avoided the hideous convertible's ramming attempt. The officer's eyes flashed beneath his helmet as he seized the chance to get something personal off his chest.

"Don't fuck with traffic cops, you little brats."

That was when Horada's group experienced the greatest terror of the day.

Ultimately, their panicked rampage ended with arrests, for the charge of hit-and-run against a traffic sign.

The young men claimed that their car was sliced open by the sign, but the police determined that was just confusion after the collision speaking. When the original location of the signpost was examined, it didn't match the expected status of a car collision at all, but they certainly weren't going to accept that the damage was caused by a single human's bare hands.

Perhaps the police thought of Shizuo Heiwajima when they heard the story. But given that they found a lengthy record on Horada and the others, they ultimately deemed it was not worth arresting Shizuo.

In any case, Horada and his gang wound up behind bars for some time—while the Yellow Scarves dramatically shrank back after that day. A temporary peace settled over Ikebukuro.

The only thing that troubled the police was that the gun Horada was suspected of using never showed up.

Late that night, Fujimidai Hill, Shinjuku Central Park

Tucked away in Central Park was a little pavilion gazebo with a hexagonal roof, surrounded by trees. The clock was approaching midnight.

Many of the windows in the high-rise buildings surrounding the park were still lit, which threw off the sense of the hour.

It was under this setting that two figures silently met atop the little hill, in the midst of an urban forest.

The smaller shadow handed over a tightly tied knapsack. The other figure nimbly undid the knot and checked the contents, smiling.

“Yep, this is it. You’ve delivered the goods safe and sound. Now I can finally get that reward from the Awakusu-kai,” Izaya said, holding up the gun that had been in Horada’s possession earlier.

“Thanks... I wasn’t able to retrieve...the bullets, though...”

“Oh, that’s all right. As long as we’ve got the rifling in the barrel, there’s no harm done if the police find the bullets. I appreciate your hard work, *Higa*. It was very quickly done.”

“Sure...”

The young man who should have been with Horada bowed his head reverently to Izaya. It was completely unlike his normal demeanor around Horada—this respect wasn’t derived solely from fear.

“I would have been fine with passing on Horada’s info so that the Awakusu-kai could handle the whole affair...but I figured if he used the gun to kill Shizu, hey—two birds with one stone.”

“Right. That’s why you told Horada where Shizuo was through me.”

“Indeed. It’s really a shame; if he’d hit him in the head or heart, it might have actually worked.”

Oddly, in the next moment, Higa spun around on his heel and spoke to the air in the opposite direction of Izaya.

“Yes, it seems that is the case...Mom...,” he said toward the shadow of a pillar

and made another bow of deep reverence. Izaya's eardrums caught the hesitant voice of a teenage girl.

"Um, thank you... You can go home and live normally from now on..."

It was not a voice one was supposed to hear in a park at midnight. Higa quickly left the scene, and a girl took his place. Like her voice, her appearance did not fit the situation. Perhaps she would have looked more appropriate during the day—but her outfit was far too proper for a girl meeting a man in the park well after dark.

"Um, are you...Izaya...Orihara?" the bespectacled girl asked hesitantly.

Izaya smiled delightedly. "Yes, Anri Sonohara...or should I call you Saika? No... you're not being possessed, so Anri will do fine for you. By the way, do you recall when we met before this?"

They seemed like people who had no connection, but they'd actually had contact several times in the past. When she was being bullied by the usual group soon after starting school, he had been with Mikado when they barged in to drive the bullies off. Of course, Shizuo had appeared moments later, so there was no chance for a proper introduction at the time.

"So you were Izaya... Thank you for your help that day."

She bowed daintily and composed a serious face before continuing, "Well...it brings me no pleasure to do this, but..."

As she spoke, a silver blade grew from her palm. A katana appeared before Izaya's eyes, the movement as smooth and quick as any *iaido* master drawing his blade.

"I need...to cut you down."

Every day the same repetition. The same incessant curses from Saika, the same dream, accepted without emotion or excitement. Through her encounters with Mikado, Masaomi, and Celty, it might have appeared that she'd escaped her seemingly normal abnormality.

But while she wished for something different, she did not wish for Mikado and Masaomi to be miserable. This was something she had to do in order to get the

daily life she wanted and secure peaceful lives for Mikado and Masaomi.

And he was the very puppet master who manipulated those around him to cause chaos—first, Saika’s children, and this time, the Dollars and Yellow Scarves. Now Anri held her sword out and faced him head-on, ready to control that puppet master for herself.

“Why...why did you do this? To Kida...and Ryuugamine.”

“Hmm? But I didn’t do anything. I didn’t even push them on the back. I just showed them a guidepost. But if you need a reason for even that simple act...”

Anri’s question was a very reasonable one. But Izaya’s response was as flippant as if he was describing what he had for lunch that day.

“It’s because I love people.”

“...?”

Anri didn’t understand what he meant by that. Izaya spread his hands with delight.

“Yes, I just love people. Their altruism and malevolence equally. The only exception is Shizuo Heiwajima—I hate him. Perhaps I just wanted to see the different sides of humanity. So here’s your question: Was that answer true...or false?” he teased. Anri’s eyes narrowed.

“I will know...once I take you over...”

It was the kind of growl that would normally be unthinkable from Anri. She leaped sharply at Izaya. From her step to her swing, the motion was pure and precise. It was as smooth as an *iaido* draw without a sheath and ought to have thrown off Izaya’s sense of distance.

But in anticipation of this, Izaya had leaped backward in a way that nearly looked cowardly, from the center of the hexagonal gazebo to the grassy hill.

“They say a certain school of *iai* is focused less on speed than throwing off the target’s sense of distance... I guess it was true,” Izaya remarked with admiration. When Anri took her neutral stance again, he challenged her with, “So how about you? If you really want a tranquil, peaceful life, you should use that katana to slash everyone you know. Once you’re the queen, you’ll get what you want.”

“That...that is not true! I...I cannot love anyone else...but even I know that is wrong.”

“How about Mikado and Masaomi, then? They’ve both expressed their affection for you, but you haven’t given either a serious answer. Can you really say that your attitude toward them is correct?”

“...”

As Anri held her silence, Izaya taunted, “What a pleasant kind of self-satisfaction. You assume that you can’t love anyone else, and you’re using that as a reason to be satisfied with where you are now. Saika loves people for you? That’s ridiculous. How exactly do you intend to prove that sword’s curse is the same as human love?”

“Please...shut up...”

She was already leaping forward before the words had finished leaving her mouth. The swipe was even fiercer and closer than the one before, but Izaya swung back and blocked it with a knife he’d produced from his pocket.

Meanwhile, he swung around to Anri’s rear, situating himself in her blind spot. Anri anticipated this and whipped the sword back around her...but Izaya was not attacking. He took more distance this time.

“Listen, I wish you wouldn’t assume I’m a pushover. There’s a reason I can hold my own against Shizu all the time. Plus...you shouldn’t have given this to me.”

Smirking, Izaya pulled out the pistol Higa had given him minutes ago and pointed it at her. But Anri was not affected. Obviously she had anticipated this and made sure the bullets were removed from the gun first.

But Izaya, smiling with the confidence of one who knew what she was doing all along, held up a plastic bag with his free hand.

“...!”

Inside the clear baggie were a number of objects that looked like bullets.

“So...was it possible for me...to reload this gun while we just had this conversation?” he mocked. But Anri was keeping herself calm, putting all of her focus into anticipating her enemy’s next move. Even if he had loaded the gun, if

she gave herself over to Saika's memory and experience, she might survive anyway.

Of course, Anri herself would be exposed to the fear of death—but she just shut her vision into the picture frame, bottling up her fear and suppressing it.

However, upon seeing her calm gaze and steady stance, Izaya quietly said, “Just to be clear, I won't actually be shooting at you.”

“...?”

“I choose Higa instead.”

“...!”

“Or perhaps that couple walking over there would do better.”

Those words drew Anri's heart into the world of the picture frame.

Izaya's eyes were focused not on Anri, but behind her—the direction Higa had descended the hill. She didn't know how far away the people he mentioned were. She couldn't hear their footsteps. How far away could Izaya kill people with that gun?

Neither Anri nor Saika had any knowledge of how guns worked.

“I mean, you can't love other people, so causing pain to the innocent shouldn't really hurt you that much...right?” he said bluntly, as Anri froze in place. “Just to be clear, I knew that Higa was a victim of the slasher. He picked a fight with Shizuo and said he got cut as he was fleeing, broken and beaten. So why do you think he was the one I ordered to retrieve the gun?”

His next words: “Because of you. I wanted to talk to you...so I could declare war in person.”

He was not talking to Anri, but the blade in her hands.

“You see, I also have a deep, deep love for humanity,” he repeated, grinning. “I won't let a stupid sword take people away.”

An appropriate way to declare war against Saika.

“Because people...belong to me,” he added at the end with a smirk. Everything that was meant to be intimidating earlier now sounded like a joke.

“Oh, but you seem to have taken a liking to Shizu. I don’t want him, so he’s yours. I’m praying that you dice him into tiny pieces as soon as possible. Good luck... And so long.”

And with a cool smile, Izaya turned his back on Anri as if nothing had happened between them. When Anri turned around, Higa was nowhere in sight—instead, there were couples and other people wandering about the park here and there.

Given the gloom and distance, no one seemed to have noticed Anri and Izaya’s sparring, but that could easily have changed.

Even if Higa wasn’t actually there, would Izaya have turned the gun on innocent people? Anri was certain that he was a completely different type of person from anyone she’d met before.

She slowly returned Saika’s blade to her body. Maybe even Saika herself had recognized something eerie and off in Izaya. As evidence of that, the usually instantaneous cursed voices stayed completely silent until Izaya was out of sight.

As though for the first time, Saika had found a human being she despised.



Fifteen minutes later, Shinjuku

As he walked the path from the park to his apartment, he heard a voice behind his back.

“Hey.”

Izaya turned around at the familiar voice and saw a six-foot-plus giant with skin dark enough to melt into the night.

“Simon?” he asked. Simon gave his usual cheery grin.

What’s Simon doing here?

For once in his life, Izaya’s mind was occupied with doubt. He was normally the one causing others to feel doubt and grow confused, but now he was in their position.

It only lasted for an instant, but an instant was all Simon needed.

The moment that Izaya started to speak, the giant’s scarred fist plunged into

his face.



Thirty minutes later, apartment building, Shinjuku

“That took you long enough. Did you get the... What happened? You look dreadful,” Namie exclaimed, taken aback by Izaya’s brilliantly blue and puffy eye.

His eyelid was swollen like a boxer’s after a bout with a particularly hard puncher, and the bruise around it was vivid and dark.

“...I took a pretty good punch, though it didn’t knock me out. As I was working my way up to being able to stand again, I got a lecture in Russian. ‘I don’t want to lecture you,’ indeed... It was one for the ages.”

“What? Russian? What do you mean...? I thought you’d never taken a bruise like that, even when fighting with that Shizuo guy.”

Izaya grimaced at the mention of his archenemy’s name. He analyzed the punch he’d just taken, comparing it to that of the loathsome one.

“Shizu’s stronger, of course...but this was the punch of someone who does some kind of hand-to-hand combat training. I was able to react, but not to dodge... Heh. Guess those rumors about him being a Russian mobster or mercenary have something to them.”

“Are you all right? You don’t have a hemorrhage, do you?”

It was rare for Namie to show him any kind of concern, but Izaya wasn’t listening.

“Damn... Just when I’d gotten the best of Saika and thought I was something special, this happens to me.”

But through the first taste of direct physical pain in ages, Izaya couldn’t help but enjoy himself.

He looked at his pupils in the mirror and ran through the basic brain hemorrhage tests, grinning all the while. He turned to Namie.

“Hey...can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Were you the one who leaked Mikado’s information to Horada?”

“I wonder. And if I did, you would have seen it coming, wouldn’t you?” she replied without batting an eye. Izaya grimaced and looked up excitedly at the ceiling.

“Heh! Honestly, some people I can read like a book, such as you...and others completely defy my predictions, like Simon and Shizu. This is why I just can’t stop loving humanity... That’s right. That must be why I can keep doing this shitty, shitty job... It’s so much fun, it makes me sick.”

Somewhere there, in the midst of his words, was the tiniest bit of truth.

But Namie listened to his confession, straight-faced, and cut him down in her usual cold manner.

“I’ve said this over and over, but...I think humanity hates you in return.”



Thirty minutes earlier in the street

Izaya felt his body float into the air as pain exploded on his face.

The floating sensation ended abruptly when his back slammed hard against the wall of an apartment building several yards away. The shock jolted his back, waist, and limbs, the blood vessels in his extremities nearly bursting with pain and numbness.

His mind was woozy, but the internal pain and nausea from the shock forced his brain into action. The voice of the black man squatting over him reached his ears.

“Hey. You mind listening to something you don’t want to hear?”

These friendly words were the start of a much, much longer monologue.

“You know, it’s laughable what a cowardly creep you are. Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

The Russian mockery washed over Izaya. He glared up at the big man and slowly replied, “Actually...I have to agree.”

His reply was in Russian as well—creating the rather surreal sight of an Asian

and a black man speaking Russian on the asphalt.

“The thing is, Simon, I happen to like that side of my personality,” he said, leaning back against the wall, his face still brimming with confidence. “I know you care about this neighborhood...but why are you showing up now? What does any of this have to do with you?”

“Oh, that? It’s quite simple.”

It was a rare, honest question from Izaya, and Simon returned it with simple honesty of his own.

“You remember Masaomi’s girlfriend?”

“...Yeah.”

“She told my restaurant partner a lot of things. About you and what’s going on now.”

The face of Saki Mikajima came to Izaya’s mind. He had told her part of his current plan—he’d been using her as a tool to manipulate Masaomi Kida and bring him back when needed.

Oh, now I see. Saki really was in love with him.

Saki had betrayed him. This fact did not particularly surprise him.

In that case, I can give them my blessing.

It was, in fact, within his range of expectations—but there was one thing he didn’t understand.

“Why would she contact you guys rather than tell Kida himself?”

“Hah! Kida wouldn’t have stopped, even if she’d told him. Plus...she probably didn’t have anyone else to call on the phone. I doubt she knew the phone numbers of anyone in Kadota’s little group.”

“Again, why you?” Izaya started to ask, then figured it out.

Why Simon? Saki wasn’t particularly close with him. It was a common sushi destination, but certainly not the kind of place where one would trade numbers with the employees.

Huh? Numbers...?

That was where he understood. Yes, Saki didn't know any number that she could reach out to for help. Which was exactly why—in the absence of anyone else she could ask—she got the contact information of Simon or the white sushi chef he worked with.

Meaning...

"Our sushi shop gets a lot of business."

The conclusion he arrived at was so silly, he didn't comment.

Simon laughed and said it anyway. "Whether it's a hospital or wherever...we can deliver to anyone with a phone book."

A phone book.

Such a simple and basic answer.

When the chef picked up the phone and said, "Russia Sushi, how can I help you?" did she take him literally?

Izaya couldn't stop the smile from touching his lips. Simon looked down on Izaya's mirth with a cold grin of his own. "I didn't make it in time earlier today, but here I am now to put a nail in you."

"..."

"You shouldn't be stirrin' up the town like this, Izaya."

"Y'know, Simon," Izaya muttered in Japanese, staring at the man through his rapidly swelling eye.

"You come across completely different speaking Russian than when you speak Japanese..."



"You know...it's really quite stunning what an underhanded creep you are," Shingen said flatly as he put his shoes on. "I've looked into your past... You were pulling the strings all along in that turf war two years ago, weren't you?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Those two groups of youngsters... They were Japanese versions of street gangs, right? You manipulated both teams, kept your hands clean, and made off

with the juiciest morsels of information to sell.”

“ ... ”

Shingen turned back to look at the confidently grinning Izaya and smirked inside of his gas mask.

“You sent that girl who worships you to those boys. From what I heard, it was her injury that ended up resolving the entire matter...”

He paused, then offered a conjecture dripping with irony. “I suspect that even that was on your orders. Perhaps you gave her all of the instructions, up to the point of her kidnapping...though I don’t know if there are actually any girls willing to follow orders up to the point of serious bodily harm.”

A moment’s silence.

Izaya did not answer the question directly. He wore a wry grin as he said, “Saki and those other girls...were so unfortunate. That’s what made them so adorable.”

“Puppets of an unfortunate man like you. I understand you’ve been doing this sort of thing since high school. Shinra used to tell me that you ‘didn’t understand a thing about love.’”

“That’s rich, coming from a pervert with a fetish for decapitated women... But at any rate... All of those girls, including Saki, were being terribly abused by their families and lovers, worse than you can possibly imagine...”

As he spoke, Izaya’s face took on a complex mixture of pity and ecstasy. “But unable to hate their abusers, they were trapped where they were. That’s the kind of people they were, and that’s exactly what made them so easy to manipulate. They were possessed by more than just the love of their partner, but a kind of worship. And I shifted that worship onto me instead—that’s all. If I did wish for death, they would hesitate, but still join me in the end...”

“Hmph. You treat this so lightly. It almost makes me think it would be very easy to switch one’s doctrine on a dime,” Shingen noted with equal parts admiration and exasperation. He recognized that the young man standing there was truly a monster. How many lives had the mind behind that smile destroyed?

Izaya suddenly changed the topic. “Does the term *leanan sídhe* mean anything to you?”

Shingen’s eyes widened in surprise.

“...”

“?”

“Er, nothing. It’s a type of fairy in Irish and Scottish folklore, isn’t it? The kind that kills the man she falls in love with.”

“Yes. She seduces a man, and if he accepts her love, she gives him talent in exchange for his life. If he resists her love, she becomes a willing slave to him until he gives in... That’s what Saki’s kind are.”

Shingen saw Izaya’s point. Falling in love with the kind of girls Izaya described would—if not provide magical powers—certainly seem more likely to end in tragedy.

“But now...Saki’s fallen to being Kida’s slave. Which means that, like the poet in the legend, Kida’s life will be drained away. As it was, so it shall be,” Izaya said in mourning for the teenager.

Shingen considered this, then thought about his own son and his pairing with a monster...and decided to argue back.

“But...can you truly say that the poet’s shortened life is a tragedy?”

Izaya smiled in a way that suggested he didn’t care in the least. He sighed, “Well, if he truly loves the fairy, then maybe he’s happy anyway.”

“If he knows full well that he’ll be misfortunate, and he loves her anyway... doesn’t that make him happy in the end?”



Hospital room, Raira General Hospital

Masaomi stared up at the ceiling from his hospital bed.

Though he’d taken the painkillers, a dull throbbing still raced through his body. It wasn’t unbearable, but it was worse than the kind of pain one could ignore to get some sleep.

Visiting hours were over, and his injuries weren't life threatening, so Anri and Mikado were sent home already. They shoved Masaomi into an empty room, and he lay there, bored, examining the patterns on the ceiling and thinking about his past experiences in this hospital.

Two years ago.

When he walked into Saki's room to suggest that they break up, she smiled at him.

"Thanks... You came for me."

Her smile was the exact same as it had been before the hospital, the expression of someone truly delighted to see him. And it was that very smile that cut deeper into his heart than any knife.

I can't. I can't bear it.

I have to tell her.

Say it. Just say it, Masaomi.

"I know."

"...Huh?"

Saki was offering him a way out as he stood there, sweating nervously.

"I know, Masaomi... You didn't really come, did you?"

"...!"

"Yeah... I heard from Izaya... You were calling him, weren't you? Over and over and over... He showed me the call history and laughed about it."

That...sick bastard!

He felt a surge of anger at Izaya, but it was immediately suppressed into a different emotion. No matter who he aimed his anger at, it always ended up turned on himself. The undeniable fact that he had run away was heavier and more real than any emotion, and it had an ironclad grip on his heart.

"But don't let it bother you. It wouldn't have changed much for me if you'd come after that or you hadn't."

“...Stop it.”

“I mean, as long as you didn’t get hurt...that was the most important part...”

It was at that very moment that the words finally spilled out of Masaomi’s mouth.

“Let’s break up.”

To cut her off.

Her consolation was nothing but pain to him.

And at the time, he chose to escape that pain by suggesting that they break up.

“Thinking on it with a calm head...I really was a totally disgusting creep...”

Masaomi spoke out loud to the ceiling, reflecting on the events of two years earlier.

“I wonder what Saki could possibly have seen in me that she thought was cool.”

Maybe it was all on Izaya’s orders in the end. At this point, he would never know.

Or so he thought.

“Maybe it’s that weird way you can be honest with yourself.”

“Bwah?!”

He was not expecting a response from the other side of the room.

Masaomi’s eyes snapped in that direction and saw that Saki was leaning up against the wall. He hadn’t realized that he was in the same building, on the same floor, as Saki’s hospital room. Perhaps it was a considerate move from the staff who recognized him on the way in.

“Wh-what the hell, Saki? When did you get here?”

“A while ago. I didn’t want to wake you up, so...”

She was staring at him intently without her usual smile. “I heard the whole story from Kadota.”

“Oh, great... So do you hate me, then? I ran away from trouble back when you needed me, and yet today, I charged into the midst of the enemy all alone. It’s a miracle I only got it this bad,” he noted wryly, looking away. Her expression only got cloudier.

“You idiot. You really are an idiot, Masaomi...”

“You knew that ages ago.” He clammed up after that.

A long silence reigned over the room. It was Saki who broke first. But it was less that she broke than that she made up her mind.

“Well, um...there’s one thing that I need to apologize to you for, Masaomi,” she said, walking over to the side of his bed. She was using her own two feet, not the crutches propped against the wall or the wheelchair she always sat in.

“That night...the truth is...I let them capture me on Izaya’s orders. I knew. I knew what they would do to me. But Izaya said...that would be the end of everything. So I went! I went by their hangout that night...right near...by...and...then...Izaya...told them...where...I was...”

Saki’s face was pale and terrified as she talked. Her voice was trembling too much to continue, and silence returned to fill the room.

She’d been certain that she would never walk again. Masaomi kept a straight face as he listened and sat up. Pain shot through his body as he did, but he made sure not to show it. He summoned a confident grin.

“What, is that all?”

“...Huh?”

“I knew that,” he lied. “C’mon, don’t you know I’m psychic?”

He’d had no idea. But now he did.

So Masaomi pretended that he had known this all along, making sure not to show that he’d ever been plagued by the idea that she might never walk again.

“And what did he tell you next? Pretend not to be able to walk, so I won’t be able to leave you behind, right? So he wanted to turn me into a pawn. Probably thought it was all some grand experiment... Sheesh. You shouldn’t be using a hospital as a hotel. I think the only reason this place let you stick around is

because they have so many empty rooms,” Masaomi grumbled to hide his falsehood.

Saki put on a teary smile for him. “For the first time...I went against what Izaya told me to do,” she said. Did she believe what Masaomi told her? He couldn’t tell.

But under the room lights, her smile and her tears were precious to him.

“You know...I think I can say it now.”

“Say what?”

“I should have gone, but when I needed to save you, I didn’t... I’m sorry.”

They were the words he never said two years ago.

The words he avoided speaking because he was afraid of admitting them.

He finished with another thing he’d been too afraid to say.

“But...I still love you, Saki.”

“...”

“Please don’t leave me.”

It was strange how easily they came out. Silence filled the room again.

After what felt like minutes, when Masaomi wondered if he ought to repeat himself, she pressed herself onto him.

“*Gwuh!*” Masaomi yelped as the shock sent a wave of pain through him. “What the hell—” he started to complain, until he saw the deadly serious look on her face and stopped.

“You...you really are an idiot, Masaomi... The biggest idiot ever...”

As the tears pooled in her eyes, Masaomi recalled something she’d said to him once and decided to throw it back to her.

“I can’t help it, can I? You can at least overlook one little flaw.”

And sure enough, she recognized those words and repeated back what he had told her in return: “If you know it’s a flaw, then fix it.”

They faced each other, reliving and reaffirming their past.

“Together...we can start over fresh.”

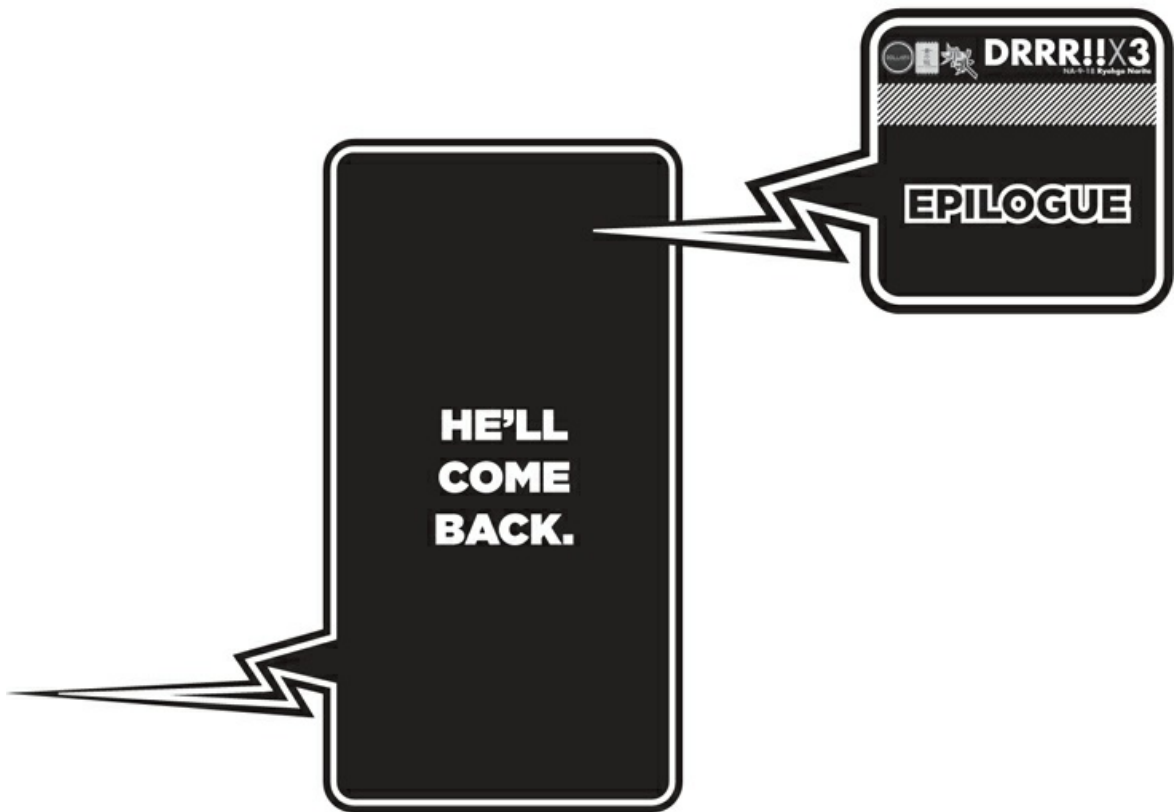
Outside, the rain was falling again, coating the room in the cold sound of its pattering.

But no one inside found it to be depressing.

No one's spirit was broken, nothing changed.

The rain just fell, like regular old rain.

Fshh, fshh, fshh, fshh...



Epilogue: He'll Come Back.

Ultimately, the rain did not stop.

Mikado Ryuugamine assumed that everything was finished.

Spring vacation would start the next day. He'd work a part-time job and go pay visits to Masaomi when he had the chance. With Anri, of course.

And once school started again, the usual days would return.

Everything had been cleared up with Masaomi. And he was smiling at the end.

Just like always. Smiling at him and Anri.

So once Masaomi had recovered, things would be just the way they always were.

That's what Mikado believed. His innocence was unfitting for his age.

It wasn't until a few days later that he realized it was just a fantasy.

He got a call from Mr. Satou, Masaomi's homeroom teacher in Class 1-B.

"Masaomi told me he's dropping out of school. Do you know what that's about?" he asked. Masaomi's teacher said some comments about how worried he was, but Mikado didn't hear any of it.

The next thing he knew, he was calling Masaomi's cell phone. But the number had already been deactivated. All he heard was the synthetic prerecorded message from the phone company.

Why? Why so sudden?

When he checked with the hospital, they said he had left the money for his stay thus far and disappeared, despite the fact that he needed much more time to recover.

He even visited Masaomi's apartment. The lease hadn't been broken at least,

but when he convinced the landlord to let him go inside, many of his toiletries and necessities were gone.

Anri was just as shocked as he was.

She put up a placid front, but Mikado had finally reached the stage where he could sense that she, too, was feeling quite down on the inside.

But there was one thing Mikado didn't know.

A piece of information the hospital did not tell him.

That bit of knowledge reached Kadota's group afterward: that Saki Mikajima left the hospital the same day that Masaomi did.

Kadota's team and the hospital staff that was aware of their relationship understood and accepted this state of affairs. But being completely unaware, Mikado and Anri were left with nothing but a feeling of loss.

Since coming to Ikebukuro, Mikado had experienced an overwhelming amount of the "extraordinary."

But the loss of what he considered ordinary was a new thing, and he didn't know what to do about it.

Time simply passed him by, and bit by bit, Masaomi became a part of the "past" to Mikado and Anri.

One day in April, Mikado invited Anri out into the city.

He did it out of concern for her mental well-being, but she seemed much happier than he expected.

"I know... Lots of stuff happened...but I'm fine now," she said with her usual sad smile. They engaged in their typical chatter as they wandered the streets of Ikebukuro.

Since that day, Mikado hadn't asked about Anri's katana, and she hadn't asked about Mikado's connection to the Dollars. Though they were things worth talking about, they both had an unspoken agreement that it wasn't right to discuss them without Masaomi present. So despite being mostly aware of the other's situation, they carried out their normal conversations without touching upon any of it.

They wandered around the town, talking about whatever caught their fancy, but it was still weird without Masaomi there. A silence suddenly fell between them.

Anri broke that silence with a murmur just above a whisper.

“I think...I liked Kida...”

Mikado felt a clenching pain in his chest. He did not let it show on his face, but he couldn't look at hers, either. He just listened as they strolled along.

“I'm just not sure... I really don't understand that sort of thing. In fact, I recently learned that someone I really respect is a woman...which meant that it had nothing to do with 'liking' her that way, I guess. It really is just plain old respect...”

Mikado had more than a hunch of who she “respected,” but he still kept his silence.

Maybe now—maybe now was his chance to tell her.

Maybe he could tell her that he loved her.

The boy quietly clenched his fist.

And with great force of will—decided not to say anything.

He felt like confessing his love for her now would be a betrayal of Masaomi. No doubt Masaomi would laugh and say, “Dummy, this is what makes you so shy!” But even though he could see that reaction, Mikado still couldn't tell her.

Maybe he was just a coward. But if he loved her here and she accepted his love, he had a feeling he just wouldn't be fully happy about it. Not in the way he should.

Instead, he arrived at a decision. If Masaomi came back...

If the three of them were as close as before, or perhaps even closer...

Only then would he tell Anri that he loved her. And if she chose Masaomi at that moment, he would welcome their relationship with open arms. He would probably be jealous. He would feel envy for Masaomi.

But even then, he would be happy for them, he told himself, as he opened his

mouth to speak.

“He’ll come back.”

“Oh...?”

“I’ve known Masaomi since we were young. He’ll absolutely come back.”

There was no certain proof of this, but Mikado wanted to put Anri at ease.

“So when he does, I’m going to give him a piece of my mind. I’ll get really, truly mad at him with a smile on my face.”

And even knowing that he was just trying to make her feel better, Anri grinned.

“Both of us together.”



At that moment, apartment building, near Kawagoe Highway, Ikebukuro

Just at the time that two upstanding teenagers were pledging to regain the tranquillity of their lives, an extremely *non*-upstanding being without a head was basking in the pleasure of a tepid, pleasing life.

“It’s so peaceful...”

“It sure is. At the very least, having you happy beside me makes me feel at peace, even if we were in the trenches on the front line.”

The days of rain and clouds were finished. Amid the warmth of true spring, Celty and Shinra were working on a crossword puzzle as the TV played a rerun of a samurai program.

“What’s this horizontal clue? ‘Another name for vitamin E, which improves blood flow and maintains hormone balance.’ It starts with T and ends with E.”

“Oh, you mean tocopherol calcium succinate?”

“Nice, thanks. For a black market doctor, you sure know a lot about chemicals. You’re like Black Jack, from the old manga.”

“As much as anyone else... And what kind of obscure answer is that?”

As they made the most of their lounging time, Celty couldn’t help but wonder. Was it right for a nonhuman like her to enjoy such an indelibly human leisure

time? With as much time and little to do as she had, maybe she ought to go do some exercise in a graveyard or something. She showed her PDA to Shinra as he read a financial paper.

“This is nice and peaceful... There’s been all this chaos with the cursed sword, the Yellow Scarves, and your dad. It’s so wonderful to just be together and relax for once.”

“If there’s one problem, it’s that the bloodstains Shizuo left behind outside the apartment may be causing the neighbors to avoid us recently. The neighborhood council hasn’t called, either.”

“Well, that’s nothing new.”

On the TV, the shogun protagonist was charging into enemy territory to vanquish the evil villain with his ninja spies.

“There’s the shogun... Speaking of which, what happened with the Yellow Scarves?”

“Hmm? Masaomi, right? It seems he left the group. There was some internal squabbling, even among the former Blue Squares, and everything’s calmed down for now.”

“I see... So there’s no worry about them going after Mikado or Anri.”

Celty stretched luxuriously, indulging her sense of relief, and rearranged the shadow that covered her body. The tight, cramped riding suit turned into a sheer tank top, boldly exposing her white arms and shoulders.

“Whoa! What? What’s that daring change of clothes about? If you’re going to challenge me like that in the middle of the day, why, I’ll just have to take a quick shower, make the bed, and...huh?”

“What?”

“Well...usually that’s about the point you blast me in the stomach or pinch my cheek to make me shut up...”

“As it happens, I really am challenging you,” she wrote teasingly into the keyboard, but right as she was about to show Shinra, the doorbell rang.

“Huh...we have a visitor.”

Oh, geez.

The timing was so perfectly dreadful that Celty slumped over the table in disappointment.

“Is it those books I ordered? Or maybe the neighbors are complaining...”

“Go get ‘em, soldier.”

Celty could not entertain guests, so she stayed hidden in the back room and started working on the crossword again, when...

“Hiii! The adult man before me must be the Mr. Shinra Kishitani! It’s such an ultimate delight to encounter you!”

What in the world?!

Baffled by the bizarre Japanese she just heard, Celty put the helmet on and peered over toward the entranceway. She was worried that it might be a solicitor of some kind of dangerous drug...but that was not what she saw at the front door.

It was a young white woman, using every inch of her ample body to embrace Shinra.

...

...Huh?

There was a strange foreign woman squeezing Shinra, chuckling through her nose and spinning him around. The sight was easily forceful enough to completely shut down Celty’s mind for a moment.

The next instant, the entranceway was filled with a black mist.

“Wh-whoa! Celty, that’s too much! Too much shadow!”

“Wow! My vision is suddenly very broke. Is this questionable phenomenon the result of the disappearance of lighting equipment?”

The white woman speaking baffling Japanese had a very mature figure but an extremely young, nearly girlish face. Celty emerged before her, the shadows writhing from every inch of her body.

“Ce-Celty!”

She stepped in between the two to pry them apart and held up her PDA with trembling fingers so that Shinra—whose face was pale—could see.

“Don’t worry, I’m totally cool. I’m not going to be stereotypical and beat you up before you can explain this. I’m an adult, so I’m sure I can understand the situation, of which I’m sure, I’m sure.”

“You are definitely losing it! I can tell from the end of your sentence!”

“I’m totally cool! I’m cool enough to talk through a boom box on the...”

Celty was interrupted from the process of keeping her cool by the white woman’s sudden embrace.

What?! I was not expecting this!

“Oh! You must be Miss Celty, the no-headed woman of obsidian clothes! I was firmly desiring to encounter you!”

Being embraced by a total stranger of the same sex was a first for Celty. Totally flustered, she set the font on her PDA to English with trembling fingers.

“WHO ARE YOU?”

When the woman saw the all-caps message, she let go of Celty, stepped back, and entered an extravagant bow.

“I have committed an error. The title Emilia is mine. In attempting to deepen family bonds, I initiated a passionate embrace.”

“Family...?”

“Family?” Celty and Shinra asked at the same time. The girl named Emilia straightened up and bowed again, much deeper than was necessary.

“I have remarried Shingen. In America, it was last year.”

“Huh?!”

“Um, well...huh? Wait, I didn’t hear about this. I had no idea, no idea, vehemently no idea!” Shinra protested, his neck stiff as he side-eyed Celty. “Er, and...if I’m not mistaken, Emilia, you look younger than me.”

“Years have no relation to ardor. Thus spake Shingen!”

Again, she embraced Shinra. Again, Celty's shadow writhed.

When she realized that she was feeling jealous of the newly appeared woman—who was, in fact, Shinra's mother by marriage—Celty clenched her fists tight.

Damn...what's with this woman and her "close but no cigar" speech?! If she's talking like that on purpose, I'm gonna smack her! Even Yumasaki wouldn't accept someone this weird! I...I don't want a peaceful life if it includes a sitcom character like her!

Celty was so frazzled by the sudden event that she was starting to lose the boundary between truth and fiction. She finally gave the woman a closer look—and spotted something that caught her by surprise.

A white lab coat.

Shinra recognized her question ahead of time and quickly asked it for her.

"Huh? You have a lab coat, too. And it's the same as Dad's..."

"Yes! I am employed at equal workplace of Shingen! When Shingen weddings me, he stated, this company researches on Celty. So from time to time, we will incision."

Wait. Just a damn minute.

"Umm, isn't that the kind of information you hide, so that you can go after Celty in secret...?"

"Shingen said Miss Celty will easily allow to dissect. We have an order to study hard the mysteries of dullahan body for the company! So next time, please to come with for laboratory."

The white woman beamed as she trampled all over Celty's human(?) rights. The dullahan withdrew all of her shadows and slumped to her knees.

I don't want...a terrifyingly dangerous life, either...

She swore to herself that she would eliminate Shingen the next time she saw him.

The lazy and relaxing life she'd enjoyed up until yesterday was already becoming a wistful relic of the past.

Chat room

—KANRA HAS ENTERED THE CHAT—

<Hey, hey! It's everyone's beloved idol, Kanra!> | Good evening|

[Hiya.]

<Huh?! No one's going to rip on me?!> [I don't have the energy to do it.]

[...Let's just say that today, I'm in the mood to murder anyone who puts on an affect like that, so stop it.]

<Wow, that's mean.>

(Um, so this is my first visit,)

(Is it okay to just rip on him with all I've got?) [You'd just be wasting your time.]

(That's not a problem, 90 percent of our lives consist of wasted time,) (I'm ready to fill this entire chat with my wasted time, basically.) (So with that,)

(I'd like to start ripping on him now, if that's okay.) [Another weirdo!]

<Everyone in this chat aside from me gets really worked up about things for no reason.> (No comment on that one.)

<What?! But you just said—!>

—TAROU HAS ENTERED THE CHAT—

{Evening.}

[Evenin'.]

| Good evening|

{Oh, we have a new member.}

(Hiya.)

(Nice to meet you, I'm Bacura.)

{It's a pleasure.}

(I got invited here by Kanra.)

|Is that so?|

[Oh? I met him over the Net. Did you meet him that way, too, Bacura?]

(No, I know him in real life.) <We're like work partners! But later, when no one's watching...eek!> (When are you going to die, Kanra?) <That's kinda harsh, isn't it?!> |I think telling someone to die is very cruel|

(I'm sorry,)

(but Kanra just gets on my nerves.) [So you're not even a tsundere, you just plain hate him.]

<Private Mode> {Um, Bacura...}

<Private Mode> {I apologize if I'm wrong about this, but there's something I want to ask you.}

<Private Mode> {...Masaomi?}

<Private Mode> {Sorry, it's just...the way you end your lines with a comma reminds me of a friend.}

<Private Mode> {...Um, if I'm wrong, please just let me know.}

<Private Mode> {It doesn't have to be in private mode, even...}

<Private Mode> {...Is that you, Masaomi?}

<Private Mode> {Um...I'd appreciate it if you gave me an answer.}

<As a matter of fact, since we meet in person, Bacura should be able to explain to everyone just how charming I am!> Good idea,)

(Let's see,)

(If I gave you a score, you would be...) ($\sqrt{3}$ points.)

[Square root?]

<Huh? Are you saying I'm so beautiful I can't be divided into round numbers?> (I'm saying you're not appropriate for elementary schoolkids.) <Huh?! I can't tell if you're complimenting me or insulting me!> (Oh, sorry, looks like this is all the time I have today.) [No prob.]

<Good evening!>

|So long|

{Oh, Bacura!}

{Come again later! You're welcome anytime!}

(I will. So long!) [Night!]

<Good night.>

—BACURA HAS LEFT THE CHAT—



Someone once said the Internet is a form of invisible communication that pales in comparison to meeting someone face-to-face.

That might be true...or it might not.

But at the moment, Mikado strongly rejected that idea.

Through the Net, he had just seen a familiar old friend.

Mikado closed his eyes and thought of many words.

Things he might say with Anri when they met Masaomi again.

About the Dollars, about Anri, about the Yellow Scarves.

There were tons of things he hadn't talked about. There were tons of things he wanted to talk about.

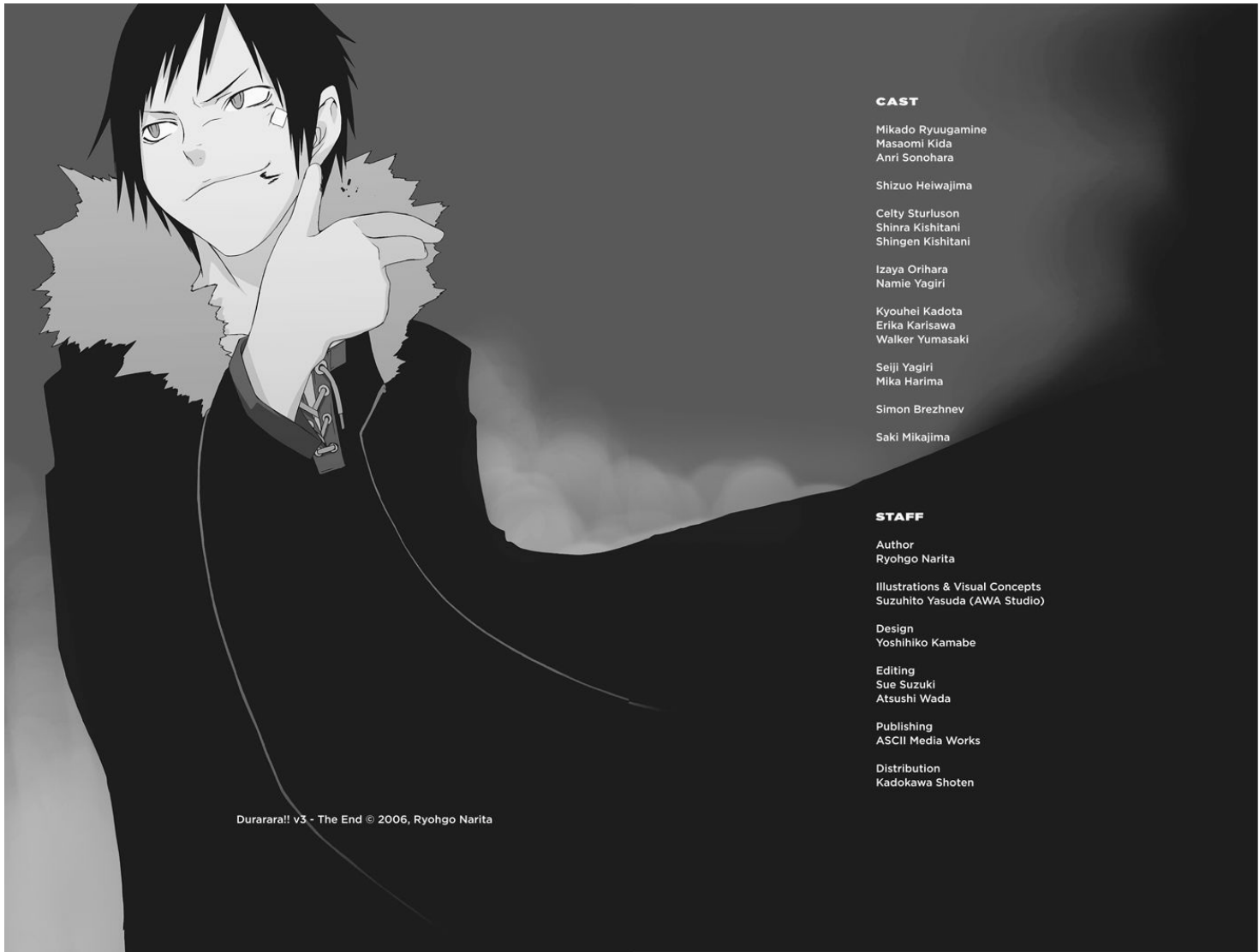
Maybe when they actually met again, his head would suddenly go blank, and he wouldn't know what to say anymore. It seemed more likely to happen if Anri were there.

Mikado thought these things over, jotting notes about what to say on his computer.

His place to return, his lost normal life...

These things did exist in the Internet.

At the very least, he hoped that whoever was on the other side of the screen felt the same way.



CAST

Mikado Ryuugamine
Masami Kida
Anri Sonohara

Shizuo Heiwajima

Celty Sturluson
Shinra Kishitani
Shingen Kishitani

Izaya Orihara
Namie Yagiri

Kyouhei Kadota
Erika Karisawa
Walker Yumasaki

Selji Yagiri
Mika Harima

Simon Brezhnev

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AFTERWORD

Hello, I'm Ryohgo Narita.

It's been a year and a half since I put out a *Durarara!!* book, and for the first time, I wasn't writing it in real time. So you'll notice I didn't include any of Yumasaki and Karisawa's time-sensitive observations. I'm hoping to play it by ear from now on. Yeah.

For this volume, I want to make a clean break with the three high schoolers, so the next story should transition us to more of an Ikebukuro and Celty-centric story, as she is supposed to be the protagonist.

More after these messages!

Commercial break. (Spoiler warning for this book!) "Why did Masaomi Kida vanish? No one can answer that question, and as if to fill that gap in everyone's hearts, a new incident arrives in Ikebukuro.

Suspicious soldiers from Russia.

The girls that flock to Izaya.

The remnants of the Yellow Scarves.

The serial assaults return to Ikebukuro.

And a TV crew chasing Celty around.

The Ikebukuro idol, Yuuhei Hanejima, who teams up with a rookie female reporter.

When vivid images of Celty are shown to the world, what will happen in Ikebukuro...?

Durarara!!, Vol. 4 on sale one day!"

Why would I do something like this? Well, because I got a number of e-mails and letters saying things like, "Is *Durarara!!* already over?" or "Don't let it end at three volumes," or "Is *Durarara!!* over? Good, now you can write more of ..

[another series I write],” or “Stop writing your other series and just focus on *Durarara!!*,” and so on.

...Where did these rumors about the third volume of *Durarara!!* being the last one come from? And then it occurred to me that it was probably just people’s imaginations running wild, since it looks like a resolution to the story of Mikado, Anri, and Masaomi.

So I thought.

“Hmm... Are people forgetting that the true protagonist of *Durarara!!* is Celty? Even my editor thinks he can turn this into a heartwarming youth rom-com centered around Mikado and Anri. I’ve got to do something about this!”

So look forward to the continuation of the *Durarara!!* series!

As far as my plans ahead, I’ll have some more *Baccano!* books on the way, followed by the afore-advertised *Durarara!!*, Vol. 4 and *Vamp!*, Vol. 4. Once enough of the short stories I’m writing for *Dengeki hp* pile up, I might have short-story collections for *Hariyama-san* and *Etsusa Bridge*. Although the *Etsusa Bridge* series has already ended, it doesn’t feel like it made a dent in my writing schedule.

It takes some guts to tell a writer, “Finish your other series so you can just work on ●●,” so I will be frank: If that happened, I would still only be writing one book a year. Just because I stop working on a different series doesn’t mean I’ll suddenly have more ideas for the first series... So I hope you will indulge my ongoing multi-series schedule...

This afterword will continue after these messages.

Commercial break 2.

“Tsun-tsun-dere-tsun, dere-tsun-tsun.

The first volume of *Yozakura Quartet*, the new manga by Suzuhito Yasuda, the wonderful artist who does the *Durarara!!* illustrations, will be going on sale in September!

It’s set in the town of Sakurashin. Four different fixers with the *sakura* kanji in their names put their lives on the line through the little tiles of pure soul we call

mah-jongg. It's a *tsundere* mah-jongg manga.

Just kidding.

It's a brilliant work of entertainment in which kindhearted goblins team up with a strict town elder to protect their home, with battles, comedy, and heartwarming goodness galore! I'll stop my advertising here so that I don't get yelled at for peddling another publisher's product, but I urge all Yasuda fans and *Durarara!!* fans to pick it up. Oh crap, I forgot to mention the protagoni..."

Well, we're running out of time (space) for this afterword. The phrase "will continue after these messages" is one of the least trustworthy of all time, but I've got enough for my usual thanks.

To my editor, who has to put up with my constant nonsense at all times, Mr. Papio. To Editor in Chief Suzuki and everyone at the editorial office. To the proofreaders, who I give a hard time by being so late with submissions. To all the designers involved with the production of the book. To all the people at Media Works involved in marketing, publishing, and selling.

To my family who do so much for me in so many ways, my friends, and the people of "S City."

To Suzuhito Yasuda for bringing the Ikebukuro of my story to life with his illustrations.

And to all the readers.

Thank you all so much!

June 2006—"Planning to buy a Wii, PS3, and Xbox 360"

Ryohgo Narita

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DURARARA!!, Volume 3

RYOHGO NARITA,

ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA Cover art by Suzuhito Yasuda

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DURARARA!!

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Edited by ASCII MEDIA WORKS

First published in 2006 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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Yen On

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas New York, NY 10104

www.hachettebookgroup.com

www.yenpress.com

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First Yen On ebook edition: March 2016

ISBN 978-0-316-30493-1

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